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M E G.

VOL. II.

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BY

MRS. EILOART.

AUTHOR OF

"THE CURATE'S DISCIPLINE,"

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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MEG.

CHAPTER I.

FATHER VIVIAN.

MR. MARSH wound his way through the pleasant leafy lanes at the back of the village towards the house where Father Vivian resided. The charm of that part of Homeshire is its lanes, so narrow in parts that it is a problem continually how carriages are to pass one another, if two were to meet; but as it never happens by any chance that two do meet, the quiet of the lanes being rarely broken even by a solitary vehicle passing through them, the problem remains to this day unsolved. The

banks are mostly high about here, and covered with all the wealth and greenness that English hedgerows so delight in. The hawthorn and brambles that crown them are seldom pruned, and at frequent intervals the oak and the elm send forth their branches to shadow the narrow footway. Sometimes the trees are so thickly planted, that, passing under, you think of some cathedral aisle; and then, when you emerge from them, you catch a glimpse through some break in the hedgerow of field upon field stretching wide and fair in the sunlight; you see the haymakers' at work, or perhaps, more rarely, for Homeshire is chiefly pasture land, the corn ripening goldenly in the sun.

The village had on either side lanes like these, and it was not an unfrequent thing for those who, like Mr. Marsh, wished to find their way from one end of it to the

other, to turn off the high road, and take the lanes instead. The hill never seemed so steep in them, and the pleasantness and greenness of the way amply made up for the slight detour from the road.

But Mr. Marsh this morning had something else to do than to admire the charming beauty of the autumn leaves, the wealth of blackberries and hips and haws, or the fair, broad fields that stretched on, broken only by their hedgerows, till the spires of St. Kevin's Abbey rose in the distance. He was considering how best to broach the subject of the sisterhood to Father Vivian, and the possibility of Mr. Stanton allowing his daughter to join it. He had seen the father occasionally, and once or twice they had exchanged a good day. Mr. Marsh had been very deferential in his own manner towards the father, and he, while acknowledging the Curate's salutation with all

due politeness, had managed to convey to Mr. Marsh's mind a feeling of superiority on his own part. It was a good-humoured bow enough; but Mr. Marsh felt that it was very much the bow that in former times—before it had been borne in upon his mind that Dissenters were *anathema maranatha*—he might himself have given to a Baptist minister. He had an uneasy consciousness that Father Vivian looked upon him much as he had once done on an Independent or Methodist. Well, this interview ought to disabuse Father Vivian, and teach him that the Anglo-Catholic Church was not so very far from his own. They had so much in common, why should they not fraternize and work side by side, the two great lights of Christendom? Mr. Marsh's heart swelled at the thought, and he hoped Father Vivian's would swell, too, and that he would deign to recognise him as a *con-*

frère, and join hands in fellowship with him.

Mr. Marsh had another errand to perform at the house where Father Vivian lodged. Two of his choristers were the sons of its master, Mr. Hubbard, a well-to-do farmer, who had lately been elected churchwarden. They were fine, well-grown lads, with splendid voices; but they were apt to be remiss in their attendance at the week-day services, and when reproved by Mr. Marsh, instead of promising to do better, had grumbled at having to come at all. "Schooling was bad enough," the eldest told him; "he'd a sight rather be handling a rake than a book; but church twice a week, besides Sundays, was too much for any fellow. And the last Saint's day, as Mr. Marsh called it, had been one when schoolmaster had given the boys a holiday, and Bob and he had been packed off by mother to church instead—which both Bob and he thought a

thorough sell, and had made up their minds they wouldn't stand it any longer, if mother went on ever so."

The mother in question was a step-mother only, and Mr. Hubbard's second wife. A brisk, bustling woman, a veritable Martha till now, but whom, Mr. Marsh flattered himself, he was fast turning into a Mary. Mr. Hubbard had not been so amenable to his teaching. He was a huge, broad-shouldered man, good-tempered enough when crops were good, and things in general went as he would have them, an indulgent husband, a kind father, and as good a master as any to be found in Homeshire. But he did not like Mr. Marsh's new ways—in fact, he had been brought up in Methodism, and would possibly never have gone to church at all, had it not been for the influence of his two wives, who had both set their faces against chapel. But the first Mrs. Hubbard

had been content with attending her parish church, as her father and mother had done before her—the Rector's ministrations sufficed for her, good easy woman. But the present Mrs. Hubbard was cast in a different mould. She openly owned that she liked everything "good and handsome about her—just as much in her religion as in all beside;" and the manner in which Mr. Marsh managed matters at the chapel was greatly to her taste. She had no time to embroider albs and capes, but she was most liberal in her benefactions of flowers for the altar; and though she was quite unable to attend matins, and was rarely present at the week-day services, she sent the two boys regularly to act as choristers, and it was not her fault if they sometimes played truant by the way. She could not bring her husband over to her views—Mr. Hubbard was obstinate and self-willed; but at least she

brought him to St. Paul's; and though he grumbled all the way there, and found fault with Mr. Marsh all the way back, still, he *did* go, and that in itself was something. The fact of his presence was "a great fact," in every sense of the word; and Mrs. Hubbard hoped the time would come when he would be as devout a believer in the Anglo-Catholic Church as she was herself.

Hillfield Farm was the prettiest homestead in all Summerly, and Mrs. Hubbard the most notable housewife in the village. It was situated in one of the lanes at the back of the village, and only separated by a few fields, through which ran a footway, from the Rectory and parish church. It was a great trouble to Mr. Hubbard that this footway was never trodden on Sundays by himself and family; even the maids were compelled by their mistress to walk up the winding lanes that led to St. Paul's, when

they attended service on Sundays; and as to keeping a Dissenter in her household, Mrs. Hubbard scouted the idea. She had dismissed the dairymaid for persisting in attending the Baptist Chapel in Milford—a great sacrifice for conscience' sake, Mrs. Hubbard said; "but duty's everything—she should never get a girl who understood her work so well; but one must be prepared, if need be, to suffer for one's Church—and count it nothing!"

Mr. Hubbard thought the suffering was on the other side, and gave the recalcitrant dairymaid a very handsome present over her wages when she went; but he let his wife have her own way in the matter, hearing, with a grim complacency, night after night, the recital of the failings of each successive dairymaid. Mrs. Hubbard changed six times before she got suited, and then had to pay four pounds a year more than she had ever

given before. She felt herself a martyr, and paid that four pounds as if it had been a tribute to the Church. There never was money better laid out, she said.

Mrs. Hubbard was not in the habit of taking lodgers, but Father Vivian had come under exceptional circumstances. A Catholic lady, who had taken a furnished house at Summerly, and who was one of Mrs. Hubbard's best customers for dairy produce, asked her if she could accommodate the Father. She was in delicate health, had no room in her own house for him, but wished to have him near. Would Mrs. Hubbard object to let him have her spare bed-room and parlour? She scarcely knew where else in the village the Father—who, though plain in his habits, was fastidious to a fault as regarded cleanliness and nicety—would find suitable accommodation. Mrs. Hubbard felt flattered by the compliment to her house-

wifery; she really had no use for the two rooms the Father would occupy, she had a vague, mysterious awe of a Catholic Priest, and she thought she should like to see a little more of the object of her curiosity. She consulted Mr. Marsh on the subject, and his fiat was in favour of her reception of Father Vivian, who thereupon became an inmate of Hillfield Farm, greatly to his own satisfaction.

Father Vivian was at home when Mr. Marsh arrived at the farm. This Mrs. Hubbard told him, as she came into the large hall when she heard his voice, and ushered him into her own sanctum. Mr. Hubbard was sitting there, reading the *Dispatch*, an obnoxious paper in Mr. Marsh's eyes, and he eyed it wrathfully. Mr. Hubbard laid it down, looking up with an air of half-defiance in the Curate's face. But he was not a man who could harbour anger against another

man who had trusted himself under his roof-tree, and Mr. Marsh found his hand heartily shaken, and himself pressed to partake of refreshment. Mr. Marsh declined; he felt a little nervous when he thought of the approaching interview, and was anxious to get it over as soon as possible, therefore he intimated a wish to see Father Vivian at once.

"'Birds of a feather,'" remarked Mr. Hubbard. "It's an old proverb and a true one—isn't it, Mr. Marsh? You've been going so fast towards Rome for the last year or two, that I suppose now you've come to ask the Father to let you travel there in his company."

Mrs. Hubbard looked a dignified reproof at her husband. Would he never learn to treat Mr. Marsh with the respect to which his office entitled him? She glanced at Mr. Marsh appealingly. Would he, for her

sake, overlook her husband's coarseness? But Mr. Marsh appeared not to have heard him, contenting himself with observing that Father Vivian had now been three months in the parish, and as he had not yet paid him the ordinary civility of a call, which was certainly his due, he was anxious to repair his neglect at once.

"Then dang it! Mr. Marsh, while you're about it, hadn't you better leave a card at the Chapel House?" cried Mr. Hubbard. "I think it's a year since the Harleys came in the place, and I've never yet heard of your remembering they were neighbours—and rat me if I don't think one black coat is as good as another!"

"You forget, Mr. Hubbard," said the Curate stiffly, "that the Church does not recognise as a member of the ministry one not duly appointed by the laying on of hands. Mr. Harley I believe to be a good

man in his way, but a mistaken one. He has clambered over the wall into the sheep-fold—not entered in at the door."

"Which Father Vivian has, and unlocked it, too, with one of St. Peter's keys. Why don't you borrow them of him, Mr. Marsh? I'd have the real thing while I was about it if I were you. What's the good of playing at Catholics? There's only a stile or two between you and Rome. Go over at once, and ask the Father to lend you his hand to help you."

"John!" exclaimed Mrs. Hubbard, "I'm ashamed of you, I am—in your own house, too! Mr. Marsh, I'll take you to Father Vivian at once."

"In his own house!" Mr. Hubbard felt that he had cause to be ashamed of himself. He was the very essence of hospitality, if not of refinement, and he had been treating a guest with rudeness. His great brown-red

face looked a little crestfallen as he observed in a lower tone,

"Well, Sally, I daresay Mr. Marsh can make allowance for a plain man's plain speaking; and I hope he'll take a glass of ale, just to show he's taken no offence."

But again Mr. Marsh declined. It was always so difficult a thing to escape from Mr. Hubbard's hospitality; but he rose and looked towards the door, and Mrs. Hubbard showed him into the Father's private apartment; and leaving him there, returned to give her husband the lecture he deserved.

He was anticipating it, and had a sheepish, shame-faced consciousness that, after all, it was not much more than his due. Mr. Marsh deserved all he had said to him, and a good deal more; but then he should not have said it in his own house.

"If I'd given it to him ten times as strong at the vestry—only, dang it! the beggar

never comes there—it would have been no more than he deserved. One has such a small chance of getting at a fellow who is always skulking behind the women's petticoats!—hiding himself behind their gowns as well as his own. If he'd go over to Rome at once and have done with it, I'd shake hands with him as an honest man; but while he's jibbing at one thing in their Church, and shying at another in his own, how on earth is he to get over the road? The Father's worth fifty of him. He says out and out what he is, and sticks to it. One knows his colour; but what's one to do with a fellow who's afraid to own himself any colour at all?"

But Mr. Hubbard knew better than to make any remarks of this nature to his wife. On the contrary, he received the scolding which she gave him with all due humility. If he didn't deserve it on one account, per-

haps he did on another; and when Mrs. Hubbard had finished what she had to say, he rose up with—

"Well, little woman, I'm sorry if I've vexed you. You're right so far—a man ought to be civil to all in his own house. But it's not so easy to be civil to Mr. Marsh anywhere. I'll go and look after the reapers, and then I shall be out of the way if you choose to give him a cup of tea to drown what I've said to him in. Truth's a good thing, the parsons all tell you, but I'll be hanged if ever I knew one of them that could stand it for himself."

Father Vivian had just dined, and was sitting by the open window looking out on Mrs. Hubbard's trim, well-kept flower-garden, now bright with its autumn display of asters, dahlias, and hollyhocks. He was a tall, thin man, of about fifty, with a gentlemanly bearing and a pleasant smile—pleasant in

spite of the shrewd gleam in the eye and the slightly sarcastic curl of the lip. He was a man of good though poor family, and had been educated at St. Omer. Since his arrival at Summerly he had heard a great deal of Mr. Marsh, and had once quietly slipped into St. Paul's and watched that gentleman's mode of officiating, looking on with a bland, good-humoured contempt, that the old Rector's torpid, drowsy ministrations, or the unpretending services at the Independent Chapel, would have failed to excite. For Mr. Marsh himself he had much the same feeling that an aristocrat of the *haut régime* might have entertained for a *bourgeois* farmer-general, or the head of an old county family for a retired stock-broker or tradesman, who might have bought a neighbouring estate, and was attempting, by dint of sheer outlay, to pass himself off as one of the members of the local aristocracy. Only,

being a good-humoured man, Father Vivian looked at such matters as fitter food for amusement than indignation, and was not at all inclined to resent Mr. Marsh's imitation of himself and his order. Indeed, he considered the imitation as the truest compliment that could be paid him, and was very well content to wait and see how long it would be before the play was turned into earnest. Into earnest it would be turned, the Father felt, unless a reaction set in, which reaction was as likely as not to be caused by the votaries of the Anglo-Catholic Church pushing their pretensions too far. This movement, to prove of any real importance to the Church of Rome, must be carried on by men of the world, who would know—that rarest knowledge—where to stop. And Mr. Marsh was not a man of the world, nor did he belong to that higher class of self-forgetting enthusiasts, men ready to sacrifice

all for their ideal of a perfect Church, who, however misled by an over-anxiety to do her honour, a wish that all that was precious and beautiful in the world, that art could bring, or intellect devise, should be consecrated to her service, had no self-seeking in the matter. Enthusiasts, glorious if mistaken men, of whom, if need be, martyrs might be made; to whom the Church, as they imagined her, was above all, and before all; who would walk barefoot, and in rags, if they could have seen her enthroned and radiant. Such men were useful, too—the Church of Rome knew well how to make them serve her turn; but Mr. Marsh was not such as these—certainly not a hypocrite, inasmuch as he deceived himself more than anyone else—but, while heaping all the honour he could upon his Church, quite ready to claim his own share of her honour. Certainly neither a Keble nor a Pusey—

Father Vivian quite recognized that fact—and not altogether possessed of the tact, the skill, the patience, which, after all, might do more service to the Church of Rome than all the zeal and fervour of the men who had so lately sought to find in her communion their visions of a free and Apostolic Church realized to the full.

But whatever Father Vivian's real sentiments towards Mr. Marsh might be, no trace of them was discernible in his manner. He rose up to welcome his visitor with all the urbanity of one gentleman receiving an act of ordinary courtesy from another, laying down the paper he had been reading to do so. It was the *Times*—not the *Tablet*, as Mr. Marsh would have expected. A very secular paper, and a secular employment; but Father Vivian, though a faithful servant of his Church, liked to see how matters were going on in the world outside it. Mr.

Marsh tried to give his visit the air of a mere morning call; and Father Vivian, though satisfied that some ulterior motive had originated it, was content to leave Mr. Marsh to declare that motive himself. Nothing seemed to lead the way to it, as Mr. Marsh had hoped; the Father talked of the news of the day, touched on one or two political questions, praised the beauty of the neighbouring country, and of Homeshire in general; but nothing arose to turn the conversation in the channel Mr. Marsh would have liked to see it take. It was gentleman and gentleman, not priest and priest, and Mr. Marsh felt uncomfortable. Possibly the Father would refuse to recognise him as such—ignore his clerkly claims altogether, just as he had ignored those of Mr. Harley, of the Chapel House, and others of like standing. It was not a pleasant position to find himself in—he be-

gan to feel rather small in his own eyes; still, as he had come there to speak of the sisterhood, speak of it he must. He had better look small in his own eyes than in those of Mrs. Orley, and he felt that he should look very small indeed if he went back to Summerly Cottage, and told its mistress that he had seen Father Vivian, and had not had courage to broach the subject to him. After a little hesitation he plunged into it, stating his own need of something of the kind to assist him in his parochial ministrations, and asking the Father if he could advise him as to its organization.

"We are so near together—the points of difference between our Churches are happily lessening so fast, that I felt emboldened to come and solicit your advice in the matter. You will not misunderstand me, I am sure, when I say that it would gratify me beyond measure to have the benefit of your

superior experience in this thing. You will believe that I come to you as one priest to another, wiser in such things than himself, to ask if you can help me."

Father Vivian passed his hands gently one over the other, and smiled slightly.

"I shall be happy to assist you, but, in our respective positions, is not my doing so rather an anomaly?"

"We are so near," pleaded Mr. Marsh. "I did not think that the matter would strike you in that light."

"Well—yes, we are near," observed Father Vivian; "but the question is, are we near enough to work together? You have come a long way towards us," he continued in a mildly suggestive tone—"it is almost strange that you have not come a little further. There are still points of difference that would not be much for you to concede, but which, till they are conceded, will make

it difficult for us to allow your claims to brotherhood."

"Well, and these points?" asked Mr. Marsh eagerly; "which are they?"

"The marriage of the clergy for one, my dear sir," said Father Vivian. "You at least, in practice, appear opposed to that. Are you a celibate from conviction?"

An awkward question for Mr. Marsh, who was only a celibate till a suitable opportunity presented itself for changing his condition; and who thought that the marriage of the clergy was just the one thing on which he could not agree with the Church of Rome.

The Father saw his hesitation, and continued—

"That is one of the points which will go a long way against the union of the two churches. And, after all, why should not yours yield it? Women are well enough,

my dear sir, well enough in their way, especially such women as Mrs. Hubbard—a model housekeeper; but what are they that they should stand between the union of the Churches; and until you are content to cede this question of marriage, I do not think we can be brought to incorporate you with ourselves. No—till then I do not see how we can look upon you as more than the least erring of those who have wandered from our fold."

Mr. Marsh felt very uncomfortable. Did the Father really mean to say that he and his order were to be placed on the same footing as those Dissenters whom he, from the height of his priesthood, had looked such scorn upon. Something in the Father's manner, even more than his words, implied that he did, and that he was a very long way indeed from recognising Mr. Marsh's claims to a footing by his side.

Father Vivian glanced at him, and guessed what was passing in his mind; but he was not disposed to be too hard on an opponent, much more on one who had only erred through over-anxiety to be a friend. He therefore went on—

"We are *not* so near, my dear sir, as you had imagined; but I do not see why that should prevent my giving you what small help I can in this matter. Let me know in what I can be of service."

Then Mr. Marsh, thus encouraged, unfolded his idea of the sisterhood, and asked the Father whether he could not help in organising it; what rules should be observed in its formation, what duties required of its members, what restrictions imposed on them, and, above all, would it be wise and well to have a distinctive badge or dress to be worn by the sisterhood when engaged in their duties?

"I see," observed Father Vivian. "No doubt with the ladies the dress is of some importance. Is that the point on which you wished to consult me? I am not skilled in such matters—but if my presence, when you meet together, will be of any service, I shall be happy to attend. We are, after all, sufficiently near in many points, to permit my helping you in any good work. If you are willing to run the risk of the remarks that my doing so may cause, I am willing to chance the possibility of censure from my ecclesiastical superiors. After all, it is an error on the side of mercy—always the best side, my dear sir, to err upon."

Mr. Marsh did not quite like the view Father Vivian took of the matter. He felt himself—he knew not how—placed on a much lower level than that which he believed his rightful one. It seemed very clear that the Father was by no means in-

clined to place the Anglo-Catholic Church on a level with his own; and that though he was not altogether disinclined to assist Mr. Marsh in the formation of his sisterhood, he was doing it much more out of a good-humoured tolerance than from any idea that he was helping one who stood on the same spiritual level as himself.

The Father was a well-bred man, but with all his politeness he had managed to set Mr. Marsh down very effectually, and make him feel that in the eyes of the Papal Church his own, with all the strides it had taken towards Rome, was a very small affair indeed; he thought of Mr. Bright's assertion, that the Church of England was about as old as any other form of dissent. That seemed pretty well the Father's opinion too. He had gone very far, but he had not gone far enough for Rome to recognise him as a priest; and he did not care to go much fur-

ther. Mr. Hubbard had told him there were only two or three stiles between himself and the Romish Church, and that the Father might help him to surmount these stiles. Possibly; but if one of them was celibacy, why, that would be a very hard stile indeed to get over; and Mr. Marsh, for his own part, felt that he should be very sorry indeed to make the trial. He rose to take his leave, and Father Vivian, taking up his hat, went with him to the door, and down the path of the garden, saying that he had occasion to go out, and would accompany Mr. Marsh as far as their roads went together. Mrs. Hubbard came after them, entreating Mr. Marsh to stop and partake of tea, and rest a little longer after his walk. But this Mr. Marsh declined; he had a great regard for Mrs. Hubbard, but he had no wish to come again in contact with her husband, and therefore he walked on with

Father Vivian, and the two strolled up the lane that wound its way from the farmhouse to the upper part of Summerly.

They had not gone very far when they met Mr. Hubbard, who was returning from the fields, where he had been overlooking his reapers. He was hot and flushed, as a man well might be whose overlookings were always performed in such a vigorous manner as Mr. Hubbard performed his. His large face was all a-glow with heat, and he stopped to wipe it with his handkerchief, and address Mr. Marsh as he met him.

"Thought you'd have stopped with the missus to tea, sir, and gone home when the day was a little cooler. I'm nigh broiled with the heat myself; but one mustn't complain—it's glorious harvest weather."

Mr. Marsh remembered that he had said nothing either to Mr. Hubbard or his wife as to the truant choristers. He would ra-

ther have spoken to the lady about them, but he felt disinclined to turn back in the heat for the purpose, therefore he said—

"I was going to ask you to speak to your boys, Mr. Hubbard. You were good enough to say they should act regularly as choristers."

"Dang it! not I!" cried Mr. Hubbard. "It was the missis's doing, not mine; but I didn't think it worth while to go against her in the matter."

Mr. Marsh wished he had braved the heat, and gone back to Mrs. Hubbard; but he could hardly do so now, as he had broached the subject of the missing choristers to her husband; therefore he continued—

"Well, then, it was Mrs. Hubbard we have to thank for their assistance—which really, when they give it regularly, Mr. Hubbard, is of some value. But they will

not be regular—have absented themselves three successive saints' days; and I am sorry to say the elder, when reproved, showed a spirit of contumacy, I may say of insolence, that I think for his own sake ought to be checked at once.

"Of course—of course, Mr. Marsh," replied Mr. Hubbard, mopping his face more heartily than ever. His sympathies, it is needless to say, were all with the culprits; but he considered he owed Mr. Marsh some amends for his incivility in his own house. "Boys always want keeping in order; and the best of them are the better for a trouncing now and then. The young rascals, I'll let them know I'll have no shirking their work, once they've taken to it, or they and I shall quarrel. Still, there's some allowance to be made for them after all, especially in blackberry-time."

"But the inconvenience, Mr. Hubbard—

the disappointment and annoyance caused by their stopping away when we have counted on their voices, are very great. I say nothing of higher considerations, which I fear would not have the weight with you that they should; but I shall hope that you will at least give the lads to understand that it is quite bad enough to fail in their very serious duties, without being insolent when reproved for so doing."

"Of course I shall, Mr. Marsh—of course I shall—no fear of that. You should have given it well to the young villains yourself at the time—but, there, you parsons mustn't speak out like other men—I feel for you there—'pon my soul, I do now!" and Mr. Hubbard desisted from his mopping, and looked sympathisingly at the two clerical gentlemen. "You can't come out with a good hearty damn, let a fellow play the dickens as much as he will; and it's a great

relief to let the steam off that way now and then."

Then Mr. Hubbard walked on towards another part of his farm, and Father Vivian said, with a half smile,

"Your work lies before you, my dear sir, if you have many such as Mr. Hubbard amongst your parishioners."

CHAPTER II.

MRS. ORLEY'S LETTER.

THERE were two posts a-day at Summerly, and it was the afternoon one that brought Mrs. Winthrop the missive which Mrs. Orley had despatched to her. She was sitting before the house on a garden-seat under the trees, when the letter came, and opened it with a little languid excitement. She had not many correspondents, so a letter was an event, in a small way; but her correspondents never had much to tell her, so that the event was not likely to be of great importance after all. But this letter appeared an exception to those Mrs. Winthrop was in the habit of

receiving, for she uttered one or two little ejaculations, which made Nelly, who was twisting Titania's whiskers round her fingers, look up curiously. Mrs. Winthrop read her letter twice over, then she handed it to Nelly, saying,

"I wish you'd see for yourself, my dear, what Mrs. Orley says—Mrs. Orley, my cousin, of Summerly Cottage, on the Common—you've heard me speak of her, I think?"

Indeed, Nelly had—or rather of Mr. Orley, for that gentleman had impressed Mrs. Winthrop, as he did a great many people, with a sense of his importance to the world in general; and Mrs. Winthrop, always glad to have some one to look up to, was very ready to look up to Mr. Orley, and take him at his own valuation, which was not a small one. Mrs. Orley Nelly had seen often in the village, and knew her by

sight and name, but that only since Mrs. Winthrop's arrival at the Oaks.

Mr. Orley's fame had not extended so far as he had imagined. The Oaks was little more than a mile from Summerly Common, but he was quite unknown to Mr. Stanton. Indeed, that gentleman made a point of ignoring the Common and its residents altogether, with the exception of the Curate, whose position entitled him to some respect at his hands. There was the crime of newness about it all—a crime ineffaceable, but by the long lapse of years, in Mr. Stanton's eyes. The Common was worthy of the name when he had first taken up his abode at Summerly. A wide waste of earth and furze, in which the rabbits ran wild, and the gipsies pitched their tents; and then people from London had settled on it. One had built himself a house, another run up half a dozen villas, and a third a few

cottages of the better sort, till a great builder, whose own residence was in the neighbourhood, had completed the change by erecting a few red-brick semi-Gothic dwellings, of no particular time and date, with small windows, and small rooms, and an immense waste of brick-work and space about them generally, which he called mansions, and Mr. Stanton villakins; and having obtained for these at least half as much rent again as they were worth, the place became popular amongst a certain class of Londoners, who voted Summerly Common the healthiest spot in the kingdom, and picked up houses as fast as they were to let upon it, which, of course, had the effect not only of raising rents, but of causing other houses to be built, wherever ground could be obtained for building purposes.

It was to accommodate this new population that the chapel of ease had been

erected a few years ago. Mr. Stanton had subscribed liberally to its erection. As the people were there, he supposed they must have a church. They had spoiled the neighbourhood, and it would be better they should have some place of worship of their own, than crowd into the parish church, where they might even expect—there was no bounds to the insolence of these *roturiers*—to be accommodated in his family pew, if there was not room enough for them below. So he gave his fifty pounds, and felt that he had done his duty by his unwelcome neighbours, and that they had no claim upon him for anything further, either for themselves or their church.

It is therefore not surprising that Nelly knew so little of the inhabitants of Summerly Common; but she had heard so much lately of the change that had taken place in the church since Mr. Marsh had officiated

there, that she had sometimes felt a wish, as far as spiritual matters were concerned, to cast her lot in with theirs. The old Rector was very good—if he had been her grandfather, she could not have been fonder of him; but his sermons were very dreary, and the church so neglected, and the whole service so unattractive, that she would gladly have worshipped elsewhere. Only she could not grieve the old gentleman by absenting herself from the family pew, which was just before the pulpit, and to which he always turned his eyes on entering it. But she might attend the week-day services at St. Paul's, she had heard they were very beautiful—that would give her something to think of all the rest of the week, and the next Sunday in church, which the Rector's sermons never did—even when she could hear them, which was by no means always the case.

She took up this letter, therefore, with a little curiosity, in spite of her remembrance of the very unattractive person from whom it came, and read aloud :—

"Summerly Cottage, Eve of St. Elfrida.

"My dear Lucinda,—I am induced to write to you from my recollection of your readiness always to submit yourself to my direction in spiritual matters, when residing with me."

"I should have had no peace if I hadn't," said Mrs. Winthrop, meekly. "Cordelia always would have her own way, from the time we went to school together. Besides, when you're visiting at a house, I consider it's only polite to think as much as you can like the people you're staying with. So as Cordelia was High Church, of course I was High Church too, though I must say it was a great relief to me, when I came here, to

find that your dear papa was not of the same way of thinking. Matins are dreadfully trying in winter. I'm sure the cold I caught through attending them with Cordelia was the worst one I ever had in my life; but it was no use saying anything about it to her. She always says nothing should stand in the way of one's duty. At the same time, I don't believe Cordelia ever had so much as a finger-ache in her life."

Nelly continued: "Owing to your position in Mr. Stanton's family, it is possible that you may be the means of inducing his daughter to join us in a sisterhood myself and several of the principal ladies in Summerly are about to form, for the purpose of lightening Mr. Marsh's labours, by taking on ourselves those works of love and mercy which his higher duties leave him no leisure to attend to."

"It's district visiting she means, my dear,"

said Mrs. Winthrop, "only Cordelia always likes to give things grand names."

"It's very good of her," said Nelly. "I can't help thinking there's a great deal of distress in the place. I'm sure I should like to help Mrs. Orley. I always feel so sorry for the poor."

"So do I," said Mrs. Winthrop, "especially when Cordelia visits them." And she gave a slight shudder as she thought of that unlovely lady's cross-questioning the women at whose houses she called, and drilling the children in their Catechism. "But go on, my dear. I want to know what you think of it."

Nelly read: "Miss Stanton is, no doubt, like all girls of her age, idle and frivolous."

"Never mind, my dear," interrupted Mrs. Winthrop. "I don't believe Cordelia ever was young herself."

"Still, although personally inefficient, from her father's position she may be of much use

to us. It is your duty—a duty that I trust neither indolence nor timidity will cause you to shrink from—to tell her as much, and to induce her to join us at once. Next Monday, at eleven o'clock, a meeting will be held at my house, where the sisterhood will be organized, Mr. Marsh presiding at it, and —but this is in strict confidence."

"Perhaps I'd better not read that bit," suggested Nelly.

"Oh! go on, my dear. I always know, whenever Cordelia talks of anything being in strict confidence, she means every one in the parish to know it."

"In *strict* confidence," read Nelly, emphatically—"it is possible that we may be favoured by the presence of that saintly man Father Vivian, a priest of the Elder Church, who may be induced to give us the benefit of his experience in such matters. Trusting that we shall see both Miss Stanton and your-

self at that hour, I remain, your affectionate cousin and sincere well-wisher,

"CORDELIA MARGARET ORLEY."

"And now," said Mrs. Winthrop, looking helplessly at the young lady she was supposed to have the charge of, "what on earth am I to do, my dear?"

"Go to Summerly Cottage next Monday," said Nelly, decisively, "and ask papa to let you take me with you—I shall like it of all things. It's very good of Mrs. Orley to think of me, and I'll do my very best, if she'll only put me in the way to be of some real use in the matter."

"I'm sure your papa will object," murmured Mrs. Winthrop—"I'm afraid even to name it to him; and if I don't, Cordelia will be mortally offended, and never forgive me. As a rule," continued Mrs. Winthrop, meditatively, "she never does forgive any one.

It's a singular thing, isn't it, my dear, that good people are the most difficult of all to get on with?"

"I'll talk to papa myself," said Nelly—"I'll tell him it's a thing I ought to do, and I don't think *he* ought to hinder my doing it. Come along, Ti. There's your letter, Mrs. Winthrop; I sha'n't want that. Don't be afraid of papa. You know I always do as I like with him, one way or another."

Nelly walked to the house, still holding her cat, but not with her usual tripping step. She was graver and more thoughtful than her wont, for this letter of Mrs. Orley's seemed as if sent in answer to the unquiet questionings that had lately been troubling her. She was frivolous and idle—Mrs. Orley was quite right there, in Nelly's opinion—and it was time that she did work in earnest; only somehow, till now, it seemed as if the work would never come in her way.

Here was just the opening she wanted, if her father would only let her embrace it. She could, she ought to, do so much—she, with all her leisure and her ample means. No doubt it would be hard at first, and she should make some blunders, but she would persevere, and have great patience, and after a time she might be as efficient a sister as any of the band. And if she could only now and then attend the services at St. Paul's—those services of which she had heard so much, with their censers and their singing, their white-robed choristers, their altar, with its cross enthroned amidst flowers, and all their stately ceremonial, till she felt that to join in them must be realizing the very poetry of religion, and carrying out on earth the worship of the saints in heaven! If she could only sometimes attend there, what a help and comfort it would be to her! Only *some*times there

was that good old Rector to be thought of, who had once told her that his church never looked the same if she were not in it, and Mrs. Vernon, who would be grieved if any slight were thrown on her husband's ministry—she must not vex either of these old friends. After all, to be permitted to join the sisterhood was the great thing that would help and benefit others—to attend St. Paul's would only be a joy and solace to herself. No, she would be content to abide by the old parish church and the Rector, if her father would only allow her to go amongst their poorer neighbours, and give them what help she might.

On she went towards the library, where she found not only her father, but her two cousins, George and Arnold Ensdell. The latter had been staying at the house for the last week, taking his short autumnal holiday there, in fact, and roaming through the

lanes and woods of pleasant Homeshire with his little cousin, thankful for once to have some one with her even more untirable than herself. Mr. George Ensdell had only come down an hour or two before. It was a custom of his, when tired of the baked air and dusty streets of London, to take the train to Milford, and walk from the station through the fields to the Oaks, where he was sure of a welcome and a good dinner, and perhaps the excitement of a quarrel with his pretty little cousin, who was just old enough, in his opinion, to begin to be amusing. Just at present, however, Mr. George Ensdell had something else to think of than such amusements; his hands had been very full in many ways since his return from the seaside, which was about a week after Mrs. Blount's death. It is unnecessary to state here in what manner Mr. Ensdell had been employing himself—that will be unfolded

before long; at present our business is with Nelly, in the turmoil of doubt, anxiety, and hopefulness into which Mrs. Orley's letter had thrown her.

She paused, irresolute, when she saw George Ensdell, whose very arrival at the Oaks she had forgotten. She did not like to speak to her father on the subject of the sisterhood before him. She did not mind Arnold—nay, she rather thought he would help her in the matter; but she would have little sympathy, she felt very sure, in anything of the kind from George. But Mr. Stanton's eyes were very keen where his daughter was concerned; and he saw that something was troubling her now.

"What is it, Nelly?—you've come to tell me something? Out with it—never mind George—nobody ever does; he can but tease you, and you can't but be saucy in return. Let me know what's amiss?"

Mr. Stanton was sitting in his favourite position by the window, and had been watching his daughter from it for the last hour. Arnold Ensdell was at the library-table, deep in the *Quarterly*; while his brother stood with the *Whitehall Daily* in his hand, from which he had just been reading a passage to Mr. Stanton. The *Whitehall Daily* suited both these gentlemen. It was fluent and easy to read, had a pleasant worldliness about it, which went very well with their own conventional ethics; and it found fault with everything and everybody in the world, without ever troubling itself to show how matters could be righted, and people taught to behave better. But much as Mr. Stanton liked the *Whitehall Daily*, it was powerless to chain his attention when Nelly was in the way; and he drew her down to the low stool near him—her own especial place—and again bade her tell him what was amiss.

Nelly hesitated a moment—in which moment Ti's whiskers suffered; then she looked shyly at her cousin Arnold, who appeared as deep as ever in his Review, and at George, who was smiling down upon her. Nelly felt angry with them both—especially Arnold, who would not lay down his book for any trouble of hers. But that smile of George's inspired her with a spirit of defiance—why should she mind his standing there, when she had anything to say that it was right should be said? And, therefore, releasing Ti's whiskers, and holding her soft, white paws instead, she said, "Papa, Mrs. Winthrop has had a letter from her cousin, Mrs. Orley, of Summerly Cottage. You've heard her speak of Mr. and Mrs. Orley, papa?"

"Well, my dear, I never do hear much of what Mrs. Winthrop says, but the Rector has spoken of him as the new Churchwarden. A stout, loud man, the old gentle-

man tells me, with always a great deal to say; but useful, for all that. I suppose such men *are* useful in their way. A National Church is a recognised necessity; and that being so, I suppose we must have churchwardens and curates; and they're both well enough, I dare say, as long as we don't see too much of them. Well, what about the Churchwarden, my dear?"

"Oh! papa, it isn't him—it's his wife and Mr. Marsh I want to speak to you about!" cried Nelly, nervously.

"You don't mean to say you've brought us a tit-bit of scandal, Nelly!" cried Mr. George Ensdell. "I thought you were too Arcadian in Summerly for any such pleasant wickednesses."

"Be quiet, George!" cried Nelly, flushing up; "I'm in earnest, sir," as a proof of it, she sent Titania from her. "Now, papa, if you'll attend, I'll go on." Then Nellie

dashed at once into her subject, acquainting her father, as well as she knew, with Mrs. Orley's intention of originating a sisterhood, to assist Mr. Marsh in his labours; and winding up by asking her father's permission to join them.

"You'd make a sweet Sister of Mercy, Nelly," said George Ensdell; "I should like to be one of your *protegés*."

Nelly kept a scornful silence, as far as Mr. Ensdell was concerned; but she looked pleadingly at her father, who appeared by no means inclined to grant her request, and rather annoyed at its having been made.

"Mayn't I go, papa?—mayn't I?" urged Nelly. "I'm not a bit of use in the world that I can see, going on as I do. I should so like to teach the children, and read to the poor people when they were ill. Of course I couldn't do much; but do—do let me try and do my little!"

But Mr. Stanton was not disposed to accede to his daughter's request. It was very hard to have to refuse her—much harder than Nelly herself could imagine—but he could not have her brought in contact with the dirty village children, nor run the risk of fever and infectious diseases by her attendance on sick beds. Neither did he choose her to mix with the people of Summerly Common. It was very unpleasant to say no to Nelly, but no must be said. If she would only have taken a fancy to anything else—a new horse, a fernery, an aquarium, a visit to Paris, a few weeks in London —he would have gratified her in any and all of these particulars, but he could not allow her to associate with these new people at the other end of the village, or run into all the dangers this new-fangled way of district visiting might expose her to.

He told her as much, adding,

"Take some other whim into your head, Nelly, and I'll see if you can't have your own way in it. But this thing cannot be—you must see yourself, on a little reflection, that it is not to be thought of for a moment."

"It's not a whim, papa; and I don't see that you've any right to treat it as such!" cried Nelly passionately. "Am I to be nothing but a spoiled child all my life?—of no good to myself or any one in the world? Would you keep me here for ever playing with my cat, and gathering my flowers? Do you think that was all I was born for?"

It was the first time Nelly had ever been so rebellious. Her father had always avoided coming into open collision with her until now, and Nelly, with a little management, had generally been amenable to reason, or her father's view of it. But in this matter he could not yield, and he began to

be afraid that she would not; and if she did persist in this mad scheme, he should have her catching the small-pox or the scarlet fever; and even if she escaped both those dangers, there would be the certainty of an influx of the people from Summerly Common invading his retirement.

He looked anxiously at her. She was flushed, and the tears stood in her eyes. How he should stand against Nelly's tears he knew not, but every way he felt that he could not yield the point in dispute. The best thing at present appeared to be to beat a dignified retreat, which would terminate the discussion for the present; and it was possible that Nelly's over-zeal in the matter might cool down in a day or two. If it did not, he would give her something else to think of, by taking her out of the way for a little time to the Lakes, or even on the Continent—anything would be better than

letting her have her own way in this matter.

He rose from his chair—it was a great annoyance the having to do so—he always spent the afternoon in his study; but it was the only thing to be done under present circumstances—and said,

"We'll drop the subject for the present, Nelly; it's quite possible that you may think differently of it in a day or two."

CHAPTER III.

THE HOUSE IN KENTISH TOWN.

NO. 20, Elma Place, Saville Road, had been empty for some time. Mrs. Needham next door had been very anxious that it should let. It was not pleasant to have an uninhabited house for a neighbour—thieves might get in, and force an entry from one dwelling into the other—she had heard of such things being done—and walk along the gutter that ran past the attic windows, and so manage to strip half the neighbouring houses. And when a policeman and his wife were put in, to take charge, matters were little better. The policeman was away all night upon duty, just when his presence might have

been some protection; and his wife was always gossiping over the garden wall with the neighbouring servants, to the waste of their time and her own, or standing at the door with a dirty baby in her arms, while the children played on the steps, and made dirt-pies in the gutter, to the great discredit of the whole street. Altogether, it was an inexpressible relief to Mrs. Needham's mind when she saw the bill taken down and the blinds going up at No. 20.

"I only hope we shall have nice neighbours," she said to her sister, Mary Norton. "Quiet, respectable people, that will keep their servants in good order, and not have the piano jingling, as the last did, at all hours of the day and night. Tell me if you see the furniture going in."

When the furniture did go in, it was of a nature calculated to give Mrs. Needham a very good opinion indeed of her neighbours,

being of a much more costly description than people in Elma Place were in the habit of having. Mary Norton was in raptures with some of the articles she caught glimpses of as they were carried from the van into the house.

"They're nice people, I'm sure, Mary, by the look of their things. A new married couple, most likely. Everything's come direct from the upholsterer's, you see, so they can't have been in housekeeping before. I wonder if the lady's pretty. I hope it won't be long before we see her."

Elma Place was the prettiest little row of houses in and about the suburban locality in which it was situated. The dwellings were small,—not a house that had more than seven rooms and a wash-house; but they were neatly finished off with a little compo over the windows, and pretty iron balconies in front of them. The front gardens were

small, but large enough to give a pleasant air of greenness to the street, and at the back there was just space enough for a grass-plot, two or three lilac-trees, and, for those who wanted to be very rural, a bench under them. A very quiet street, with little traffic, where the organ-grinders plied their trade undisturbed by either inhabitants or policemen, and where, after the tradesmen's boys had made their rounds, there was little to disturb the stillness, till the return of the gentlemen from business. A well-kept, neat, orderly street, and Mrs. Needham's the neatest and best kept house in it.

The master and mistress of Number Twenty were supposed to have come to their new residence in the evening, for nothing was seen of their arrival. It being rainy weather, the lady did not make her appearance for some days, either out of doors, or in the street, or the little back garden,

and Mary Norton felt curious about her. The curtains were so lovely next door—Mary was just a little gushing at times—and the work-table by the back window such a love; and the flower-stand in the front filled with such exquisite flowers, that she felt sure the owner of all these pretty things must be perfection. She kept as good a look out, therefore, as her present employment—the painting a group of asters—permitted her; and on the fourth day, as she sat in her little room, which was half studio, half bedroom, had the gratification of seeing the new neighbour.

Only a back view, however. The lady was standing by the wall at the end of the garden, gathering a few ivy leaves. She was rather tall, and even in her loose morning wrapper—a wrapper, however, of a style and texture not often seen in Elma Place—Mary could perceive, slight and

well-formed. Mary had failed in High Art, as I have already told, and, according to Mrs. Mayne, would never make an artist; for, after all, *what* was a group of asters compared with Boadicea? But she had something of the artist's eye in her for all that, and it dwelt with pleasure on the graceful outlines before her.

"I'm sure Lucy would like to see her—I'll call her," said Mary; and Mrs. Needham, who was only in the adjoining room, came when summoned. She was an active little creature of about thirty, with three or four children to look after, and a house which it was the pride of her heart to keep in the neatest, trimmest order possible. She had not much time to spare for her neighbours, but, still, she came forward when called by Mary, and looked from the window with nearly as much interest as did that young lady herself.

"A good figure—very," said Mrs. Needham, decisively; "and splendid hair. How well she does it too—she's turning now. Why, Mary, I never saw a face so like that one over the mantelpiece there. One would think you had painted it from her."

Mary Norton looked intently. Like—yes, there was no questioning the likeness between the daintily-dressed young lady now returning to the house, with the ivy-leaves in her hand, and the girl from the streets, whose face had so won upon her. It was impossible that they could be the same; and, yet, stranger things had happened after all. A man might surely forget a girl's low parentage and poverty when she had such a face as that to tempt him to do so. Men had done so before; and though this lady's morning-dress, with all its simplicity, was expensive and well-chosen, still she did not appear quite accustomed to wear such long,

flowing drapery. Mary remembered Meg's short skirts, and the pretty feet that they displayed. This dress seemed in the way of its wearer—she stumbled twice as she walked; and though the head was well set on the shoulders, and there was a certain natural grace about the whole carriage, still, there was something wanting, and the perception of this want caused Mrs. Needham to say emphatically, as she looked, "Very handsome, but not a lady."

"No, I don't think she is," replied Mary. "Do you know, Lucy, I feel sure that she's the very girl I painted that picture from."

"Nonsense, Mary; you don't mean to say anything so scandalous!" cried Mrs. Needham, looking aghast, taking in directly, as her ten years seniority entitled her to do, all the facts involved in an artist's model being promoted to Elma Place, and the wearing of a

morning wrapper like the one before them.

But Mary Norton was younger than her years in some things, and she did not at once realize what her sister meant by this outburst, and therefore she simply observed,

"She is really so beautiful, Lucy—where would be the wonder in any gentleman's marrying a girl like that?"

"Marrying!" Mrs. Needham ejaculated, scornfully—"if this really is the girl you say, Mary, there's been very little marrying in the case. To think of our having such neighbours, after all! And the street has always been so respectable! Nothing of the kind ever known in it since we came here. And there'll be nice goings on with the servants! People like that are sure to have some giddy gossiping hussy, who'll dress just as she pleases, and spend half her time talking over the wall. Dear! dear! it would have been ten times better to have

had the house empty than such tenants as these in it!"

"I don't believe, Lucy, things can be as you say!" cried Mary Norton, warmly. "I'm convinced it's the girl—there can't be two such faces in the world; but I'm sure she's married, if she really is the mistress next door."

"Well, we shall soon find out whether she is or not," said Mrs. Needham. "I've no doubt Ann knows all about them by this time. I caught her this morning calling out of my bedroom window to the servant at No. 20, as she was taking in the bread. I expect they're bosom friends already, and it's very little work I shall get out of Ann if that's the case."

Mrs. Needham went down to make a pudding, that being a part of the cooking most mistresses in Elma Place took upon themselves; and while engaged in the manu-

facture, she led Ann, who was peeling potatoes, to speak of the new-comers next door. This required a little judicious management, it not being advisable to show much interest in them herself, as otherwise Ann might have taken her doing so as *carte blanche* in the way of gossipping for the future. But by a little skilful fault-finding for the talking over the wall last night, and wondering *what* girls could always find to chatter about, Ann was led on to disclose all she had learned about the new people; and Mrs. Needham found that, whether married or not, the young lady she had seen was the mistress of the house. There were only two in family, Ann said, and the gentleman was much older than the lady; they had just come back from their honeymoon, and the lady knew very little of housekeeping; the cook—they kept two servants—had been engaged by the gentleman to see to it

all; the housemaid was quite a young thing —nice easy places they must both have— only two in family, and a lady who was too much of a lady to see to anything herself.

Here Mrs. Needham thought it advisable to check Ann—it was not desirable that she should be drawing comparisons between her own lot and the easier places of the domestics next door. Married or not, Mrs. Needham felt that she had good reasons for wishing they had never come into the street. There was not another house in it that maintained cook and housemaid. That plague of her life, Ann, was the only one she kept, and in common with most of the domestics in Elma Place, she was required to officiate in every household capacity, and fill up any spare time she had by acting as nurse. But what could these people want with two servants, when every other house in the street only had one? Mrs. Needham

felt more convinced than ever that a *ménage* conducted with such a disregard of economy, and the mistress of which was so ignorant of housekeeping, could not be a respectable one, and foresaw all sorts of evils from its being located in Elma Place, the least of which was the rendering Ann more idle and pert than ever, and the driving every respectable family from the street.

Mary Norton was troubled by the doubts her sister had implied. It would spoil all the pleasure with which she looked upon her picture, which it had been such a labour of love to paint, and which she had gone without a new bonnet to frame, if its original was impure and fallen. No idea of the kind had ever occurred to her with regard to Meg; but then such ideas never occurred to her of any one, unless other people suggested them. That the girl was poor and ignorant she saw, but of worse evil she had never thought;

and it had seemed such a natural, easy solution of Meg's appearance as a lady, that some gentleman had fallen in love with and married her. She went on with her painting, but it progressed slowly—so slowly that she began to think the Robin would be rather unpleasant before long, if she did not make more progress. But it was all of no use; she could not work this morning, so putting aside brushes and paints, and locking her door, lest the children or the cat should interfere with the defunct bird, she went out with the intention of asking Mrs. Mayne if she could tell her anything of her former model.

"If she's married, I should think Mrs. Mayne must know—especially if it's to an artist, as is most likely the case. I shall be so glad if it is! I'll never fall in love with a face again, if I find I've been deceived in hers!"

Meanwhile, the cause of Mary Norton's throwing up her morning's painting, and the object of Mrs. Needham's suspicions, had gone into the house with her ivy-leaves, which she arranged in some Parian vases, which threw out their rich sombre greenness admirably. Then she looked to the flowers in the stand—hot-house plants, all of them, for it was now November—and hung over their beauty as a child over a new toy; then she went to the window, and glanced up and down the street, and next amused herself by re-arranging the furniture in the two rooms, which opened with folding-doors, looping up here a curtain, there shifting the position of the chairs, placing the books afresh on the tables, bringing the sofa a little nearer the fire; and, at last, when she could find nothing more to do, sank down with a sigh of satisfaction on an easy-chair, saying, with a half-sigh, in which regret and self-congratu-

lation seemed equally blended, "Did I ever think I should have such a place to live in!"

Indeed, the rooms were very pretty—furnished well, but not too well to be out of keeping with the size of the house. A soft velvety green predominated in the carpet, and the chairs and curtains were of damask to match. There were several water-colours, and some good engravings on the walls, and some beautiful Parian figures and Dresden china on the mantelpieces and cabinet. Plenty of well-bound books and nick-nacks on the tables, and a general air of quiet luxury and unpretending good taste pervading the whole. The picture was completed by the presence of the one figure in it. A face and figure far more in keeping with their present surroundings than they had been with those of Swamp Town. The eyes, that looked with a half-sadness around, were the same that had bent so despairingly over

Joe, as he lay in his last illness; that had wept bitter tears over a dying babe, and looked with such wondering reverence upon Bailey's Eve. Mary Norton was right. Her late model was now transformed into the mistress of Number Twenty, and her sister was right, too, in suspecting that the ties which linked her to its master were not legitimate ones.

Mr. George Ensdell had developed his model to some purpose. He had drifted into this present state of things rather than sought it. What else could he do, he had sometimes asked himself, in a vague attempt at self-exculpation, when he found Meg alone in the world, with nothing to depend on but her flower-selling, or such employment as Mrs. Mayne might procure for her as a model? Could he leave her to hawk violets in the streets, or pose herself for two shillings an hour to any one who chose to

employ her. If he did, there was no knowing what she might come to, with that wonderful beauty, which in London might only pave her path downward, more thoroughly. And her mind just awaking, too! Her very beauty increasing tenfold, through the soul that was beginning to animate her. Should he leave the work just as he had commenced it?—and let Meg drift along as she might, till either, at the best, she again kept house for another Joe, and became coarse and hard and gin-drinking like the women around her; or was caught up by some artist, who had learned to look upon her as something besides a model, and who, after inducing her to share his Bohemian life for a time, would, when his pictures paid well enough for him to turn respectable and marry, send Meg adrift, to get her living as she might; in which case the chances were that she would sink swiftly down to a

depth of degradation lower than any in Swamp Town. No; he would not do this —it would be cruel to the girl—and Mr. Ensdell felt, cruel to himself. Why should he be so cruel to either? He would train and teach her—it would be pleasant work enough, now she had mastered the first few rungs on the ladder of knowledge. He would read Shakespeare and Tennyson, and give them to her to read; she should have music lessons if she liked, and he would himself instruct her in drawing. This work of educating Meg, bringing out the refined and artistic capabilities that he felt sure were in her, would give a new zest to his life. He should be a modern Pygmalion, with a statue more beautiful even than that the Grecian sculptor endowed with life. He felt more enthusiastic about this matter than he had thought he could ever feel again. He had not known much warmth or ro-

mance in his youth; but what little he had ever experienced, seemed to return to him now. As to giving Meg's connection with himself the only legal security in his power, that never occurred to him. Such a piece of Quixotism was not in his nature. He would have despised himself if it had been. He was by no means blind to the fact, that some day or other he might tire of his new toy, or that he might find it necessary, with advancing years, to marry; in which case it would be only a proper sacrifice to his wife to put Meg from him. Mr. Ensdell had great ideas of the decorum a married man ought to maintain, but even in that case he would take care his toy should suffer as little as possible by the fall. He would provide liberally for her—indeed, when his mind reverted to that part of the subject, he felt that if it were not such an extremely unpleasant thing to do, he would make his will at once,

in case of the worst. But making one's will is disagreeable work. It would be as well to put off the doing so a little longer—at any rate, there was no occasion while he was in such excellent health. As to Meg, do you expect me to excuse her? I have not a word to say in her behalf. She simply did what to her ignorance—ignorance, mind, not innocence, *that* had been gone years ago; they must be babes and sucklings indeed who possess it at Swamp Town—appeared the best thing to do. She was very lonely, and she must live. Mr. Ensdell seemed very kind, and was a gentleman. It was pleasant to be with him, and he would help her with the books, the hard words in which still troubled her at times; and he would give her a home, with flowers and pictures in it, and take her sometimes into the country, where she could see the tall trees and the green fields. She would do

her best for him in return—try and keep things straight and tidy, as she had kept them for Joe. Poor Joe! she liked Mr. Ensdell very much, but he could never teach her to forget Joe; and she would take great pains to talk like a lady, and dress and look like one, so that Mr. Ensdell should not be ashamed of her when she went out with him. It was very little she could do after all—and he was going to do so much for her!—but she would do that little to the best of her power.

Not a thought, you see, of wrong-doing in it all. Meg was just acting according to her lights—such lights as serve to guide thousands like herself in the close streets and foul alleys that our civilization has failed to enter, and before which our Christianity, with its creeds and formulas, stands powerless and dumb.

And so it was that Meg was now at No.

20, Elma Place; in the home that Mr. Ensdell had done his best to make a bright and attractive one for her, and surrounded by everything that he thought likely to conduce to her general improvement, and the development of all those mental germs which, when ripened, would make her a companion worthy of him.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. HUBBARD SPEAKS HIS MIND.

THE news of the projected sisterhood had thrown all Summerly into a state of excitement. The question amongst the ladies was much less whether or not such a thing was desirable, than who should or should not be included in it. If the sisterterhood were formed, it was very clear that the belonging to it would be a stand-point of gentility; therefore those ladies who were doubtful whether they should be included in Mr. Marsh's band of ministering angels set their faces against the scheme altogether, and began to say that if there was to be anything of *that* kind in the parish, it would

be time for the Rector to interfere. They might as well turn Roman Catholics at once, if this was what the High Church was bringing them to. But these ladies, after all, were a small and insignificant minority, not likely to be much considered in the matter. The majority were strongly in favour of the movement, some from sheer kind-heartedness, thinking that it was time something was done to reclaim the parish from the slough of ignorance and vice in which it lay, and ready to do their best towards the good work, if they were only set in the right way to do it. Others, of a more saintly turn of mind, were ready to co-operate in anything that Mr. Marsh desired them to do. Their faith in him as a priest was unbounded, as was their conviction that they could only be saved by blind obedience to Holy Church, of which he was a servant.

Then there were a third and more nu-

merous class, who liked the prestige of belonging to anything so select as Mr. Marsh's sisterhood was sure to be, who were pleased with the little importance that it would give them, and the pleasure not only of being *in* themselves, but of keeping others out. If *all* the ladies in Summerly had been included in the sisterhood, not one of these would have cared to belong to it. As it was, they were afraid of its not being exclusive enough, and of their being required to associate with any one one half step lower in the social scale than themselves.

Not a gentleman in the village approved of the idea, but as the torrent had set in its favour, they thought it useless to attempt to stem it; each trusted that some one else would be brave enough to do so, but shrunk from attempting the task himself. Mr. Orley had been informed by his wife that she should expect him to be present at the

meeting, in order to support Mr. Marsh, but Mr. Orley would have preferred declining the honour. This was a new sort of thing for him to do; generally Mr. Orley seemed to consider that nothing could prosper unless he was in some way connected with it. As his colleague, Mr. Hubbard, said of him—"Since Mr. Orley came to the parish, not a pie had been baked but he had had a finger in it." But the present pie was one with which Mr. Orley would have been gladly excused from meddling.

Still, as his wife had told him he must be present, he stayed at home, in obedience to her behests. It was a miserable morning for him. Generally, whenever he had indulged himself in a holiday, the time had passed pleasantly enough, even if he did not stir beyond his garden walls. There was always plenty to interest him in the garden and greenhouse, in the looking after Stone

the gardener, and directing and interfering in a manner that had made that individual, before now, tell the cook in confidence that, if "master were at home every day, he wouldn't stop in the place for ten times the wages." He walked moodily about the grounds, too subdued even to lecture Stone, or to stand at his garden gate, as was sometimes his delight, to let all the world see —the Summerly world, at least—that Mr. Orley was disporting himself at home. The very servants pitied him; they knew he had been kept at home against his will, and—as, of course, the projected sisterhood had been discussed in every kitchen and tap-room in the village—for what purpose. They knew that he would be made to approve of whatever his wife approved, and follow her lead in all matters, let his own opinion be what it might; and that, in spite of his size, and the dignified majesty of his bearing, there

was not in all Summerly a better-drilled husband than himself.

Mrs. Hubbard had been invited to join the sisterhood. There had been a little hesitation at first about doing so, her position not entitling her, it was considered by the Miss Werners, to mix on an equality with the *haut ton* of the village; but she was a Churchwarden's wife, and it would be well to conciliate her, as her influence over her husband was known to be very great, and it might be desirable that she should use that influence. There were other matters to be discussed at this meeting besides the sisterhood—*that* the ladies could have settled for themselves, without any assistance from the Churchwardens; but there were some things they could not carry out so well without them, and therefore it had been settled by the select council, who discussed preliminaries, that Mr. Orley should remain at home,

and Mr. Hubbard be requested to look in at Summerly Cottage in the course of the meeting. Consequently the note which requested Mrs. Hubbard's presence thereat, also contained an intimation that Mrs. Orley and the ladies of the committee would be glad to consult Mr. Hubbard upon some matters of importance.

"Dang it, missis!" exclaimed Mr. Hubbard, "isn't it enough to have you taken away from minding the house, to idle your time with a parcel of foolery that will do no good to any 'varsal soul on earth, and only set the way to a lot of gadding about and poking of noses where they're not wanted, but they must get me into the mess too if they can? Nice sister I shall look, shan't I? I expect they want a brother or two, if the truth's known; only, to my thinking, the brothers that haven't got wives would suit them all the better."

Mrs. Hubbard let her husband talk as long as he pleased. She managed him quite as successfully as Mrs. Orley did *her* churchwarden, but in a very different manner. A much pleasanter manner too, and much less derogatory to the dignity of the gentleman so managed. She ruled by studying her husband in every way that did not directly interfere with her devotion to the Church, or what Mr. Marsh considered such. Not a man in Summerly had his dinners more punctually or better served than Mr. Hubbard. The farm-house was a picture of rural neatness and prettiness; the maids were well looked after, and the children—not one of them her own—cared for as thoughtfully as if their own mother had still been living. The best butter in the place came from Mrs. Hubbard's dairy, and her fowls and geese paid better than any one else's. Mr. Hubbard knew his wife's

good qualities, and considered it a mere matter of justice to give her a little indulgence in return. Besides, he was fond of the cozy, bright, buxom little woman who kept his household in such admirable order, and studied both himself and his children so much. But with all this, he by no means lived under such a Reign of Terror as did his fellow-Churchwarden; nor was Mrs. Hubbard at all the woman to wish to rival Mrs. Orley as to the complete subjugation into which she had brought her husband. So she went to work now in a very different manner to what Mrs. Orley would have done, and represented to her husband that as it was very clear Mrs. Orley and the ladies of the committee could only have intended to pay him a compliment by asking him to the meeting, it would be an ungracious thing of him to refuse to attend it. "It will look for all the world, John, as if

you felt you were out of place in a drawing-room, or had been so little used to ladies, you were afraid of meeting a few of them together. Do go, John, if it's only out of compliment to me. I wouldn't be there all the time. Suppose you come with the chaise, and fetch me at half-past three? You can hear what they've got to say, and then come away as soon as you like."

In reality Mrs. Hubbard was a little flattered by the invitation to herself to join the sisterhood. She had scarcely expected it, none of the ladies in Summerly Common considering her visitable, in spite of her devotion to Mr. Marsh, and her liberality in the floral decorations of the altar. Had she not been a churchwarden's wife, that invitation would never have been sent; but Mrs. Hubbard was not to know that, and even though she might guess as much, still the fact of her being in the sisterhood was a

great one, let the cause of her being invited to join it be what it might. So she wished to exhibit her husband when she went, and to show into what good order she had brought him, and how conformable he could be to the behests of the Church, when it was her will that he should be so. For what especial reason he was required, she had not the slightest idea—possibly it was not legal to found a sisterhood without the consent of the Churchwardens, or maybe they wanted the co-operation of the Rector, and thought that as John had so much influence with him, he might prevail with the old gentleman to give it. Either supposition was very flattering to John's importance, and her own as affected by it, and therefore she was very urgent with her husband to let the light of his countenance shine the next Monday at Summerly Cottage.

At last Mr. Hubbard promised that he

would come and fetch her, and just show himself in Mrs. Orley's drawing-room for a minute.

"Though, what I shall do when I get there, with a parcel of women chatterin' an' clackin' around me, is more than I can say. A man must be bred to it like the parsons, before he can stand much of that kind of work."

So Mrs. Hubbard was so far satisfied with the concession her husband had made, and had only to consider in what toilet she would make her most effective appearance in her new *rôle*, as one of the ladies of Summerly; and as that was a matter in which she had no occasion to consult her husband, she prudently determined to say nothing more of the meeting till the important Monday came.

Mr. Orley was not so fortunate as Mr. Hubbard. *He*, happy man, could delay

making his appearance till the meeting was nearly over. Not so Mr. Orley. He had to welcome every lady, and usher her into her seat, and bow and smile, and play the gratified host, as if every woman there had come for his pleasure, and not for her own. And he had to receive Mr. Marsh, a thing which, just at present, it went rather against his grain to do, inasmuch as he had to thank that gentleman for having originated the sisterhood, and brought about the present revolution in Church matters. But that was nothing compared to the having to receive Father Vivian. Mr. Orley had been brought up in a thorough English detestation of Popery and Popes; as a boy had believed in Guy Fawkes as an emissary of the devil; and in his youth had denounced, with unqualified zeal, the Catholic Aggression. He had been a good Protestant all his life, and here was he obliged, because it pleased his wife that

he should do so, to welcome a Catholic Priest into his house, and look as if he were really glad to see him there.

Father Vivian read his feelings. There were few men whose feelings Father Vivian's shrewd eyes could not read, and he liked him none the worse for entertaining them. They were natural prejudices after all, and therefore he received Mr. Orley's courtesy with a suave friendliness, that was not by any means all assumed. Then he went up to the lady of the house (Mrs. Orley had insisted on her husband going into the hall to welcome the Father and Mr. Marsh, so that he had received them first), and greeted her with a manner that had a charming mixture in it of pastoral interest and old-world courtesy.

Every lady in the room felt her heart beat a little quicker when Father Vivian entered it. Mr. Marsh sank to nothing in

their eyes. They had a kind of consciousness that, after all, the Father was the real thing, and Mr. Marsh only an imitation, and they waited anxiously to hear what he would say with reference to the scheme about which they had been called together.

But the Father was not inclined to say much. He knew better what was due to Mr. Marsh, and therefore he took a seat by the window, a little distance from the group of ladies, where he could see and hear all that was going on without coming forward himself, unless directly appealed to. It was an amusing scene altogether to him. He enjoyed it thoroughly; the fresh English faces were so pleasant to a man who had spent many years abroad; some of them were young, too, which made them all the pleasanter, and some were neither young nor fresh; but, on the whole, these were not the least amusing. The responsi-

bility of the affair weighed more upon them than it did on the younger ones, who, indeed, did not feel any responsibility about it at all, but were more anxious about the dress than any other part of the business. Life was rather slow at Summerly. There were very few marriageable young men; operas and theatres were not within easy visiting distance; society was stiff, as it is in all suburban localities; and few of these girls but were glad of something to give a fresh zest and excitement to it. If idle hands find so much mischief cut out for them, what must the idle minds?

Mr. Marsh was in his element. Men of his calibre always are, in a group of commonplace women. Father Vivian watched him going from one to the other, lingering a little longer over the unmarried ladies. Mr. Orley was the most uncomfortable person present; he did not know where to sit,

or what to do with himself. Generally speaking, he was the essence of gallantry—gallantry of a stately and pompous kind, but still gallantry. Mrs. Orley did not object to this. She was not a jealous woman, and not disposed to interfere with her husband's small amusements, feeling very sure that he stood too much in awe of her to carry them to an unjustifiable length. But this afternoon Mr. Orley was too wretched to be gallant, and too thoroughly angry with himself and every one about him. They were all in a conspiracy to make themselves and him ridiculous. And his own wife was the chief mover in it.

Mr. Marsh opened the subject. It was necessary that a sisterhood should be formed, for the purpose of that minute house-to-house visitation, for which his duties left him so little time. He went on to explain the duties of this sisterhood, the chief one

of which appeared to be to bring backsliders into the fold of Holy Church. Then a great many questions were raised, and a great many minor points settled relating to the respective duties of the ladies, their hours for visiting, and the best mode of distributing alms. All these were every-day matters, which appertained to ordinary district visiting; and some of the ladies, who had been accustomed to work of the kind, gave very sensible hints. There was not much occasion to appeal to Father Vivian; after all, they might have done very well without him, but the Father was just as well pleased that they had not—he would have lost a great deal by being absent from Summerly Cottage that afternoon.

During a pause in the conversation, Miss Werner was heard to ask Mrs. Orley if Miss Stanton were likely to join the sisterhood. Mrs. Orley's answer was eagerly looked for,

but it was not satisfactory when it came. She had written to Mrs Winthrop on the subject, and she had received a reply informing her that, if possible, she would be with her that day; but she had very great doubts as to Mr. Stanton's allowing his daughter to accompany her. This was discouraging; if Miss Stanton had been ill or otherwise engaged, her chaperone's presence would have counted for something; as it was, even if she came, Miss Stanton's staying away in obedience to her father's wishes would throw a damp over the whole affair.

Mr. Orley, in his heart, thought Mr. Stanton a sensible man; but he dared not say so, even when some of the ladies proposed that he, as churchwarden and oldest inhabitant of Summerly Common, should call on Mr. Stanton, explain the nature of the sisterhood to him, and, on behalf of the ladies generally, request his daughter's co-operation.

in it. He would do it so well—he was the fittest person. He would place the thing before Mr. Stanton in a suitable light. That gentleman was not, perhaps, aware *who* the ladies were with whom his daughter would associate—this was said with a little assumption of dignity on Miss Werner's part—she and her sister regarded themselves as the *crême de la crême* of Summerly. Mr. Orley could tell Mr. Stanton that he need have no fear as to his daughter's fellow-workers.

Mr. Orley felt himself a miserable man. Must he not only have to sit there enduring all the tediousness of this womanish twaddle—this discussion as to doles of flannel petticoats and groceries—but he must force himself upon Mr. Stanton for the purpose of inducing him to let his daughter mix herself up in the matter, a thing that no daughter of his own, if, like Mr. Stanton, he were fortunate enough to be a widower, should have

anything to do with. He was about to protest against such a charge being thrust upon him, but he caught a glance from his wife's cold leaden eye, and he knew there was nothing for him but obedience. At this moment Father Vivian came to the rescue; indeed, he felt for the poor pompous man, trying his best to bear up and look brave and dignified, and not altogether out of place in the midst of all these female tongues, and with the fear of his wife before him; therefore the Father rising, and, with a slight wave of his hand to enforce silence, said,

"It seems to me, ladies, that you are almost forgetting the consideration due to your pastor. Is not this an office that he should more fitly take upon himself? You will pardon me, I trust, for giving my advice unasked, and reminding you of this slight lapse on your part?"

Mr. Orley felt intensely grateful to the

Father. There was some good in the fellow after all, though he was a Popish priest; but further comment either from him or the ladies generally was rendered superfluous by the stopping of a carriage at Mr. Orley's gate, from which alighted not only the faded form of Mrs. Winthrop, clad in her sombre robes, but a slight young figure, fresh and blooming as a spring morning, which was at once recognised as Miss Stanton.

This was so much more than had been hoped or expected, that a murmur of delight ran through the room, in which Mr. Marsh joined most heartily. Too heartily to please Miss Rachel Maria Werner, who had for some time been considering Mr. Marsh as her own exclusive property. He need not have looked so very much pleased with Miss Stanton's arrival. Of course it would be a very good thing for the sisterhood if she belonged to it, but then there

were other things than the sisterhood to be thought of. It would have been better for Miss Stanton to have stopped away altogether, than to turn Mr. Marsh's head, as she seemed likely to do.

Father Vivian himself had noticed that Mr. Marsh had remained by Miss Rachel Werner longer than by any other lady. She was some way beyond thirty, heavy, ill-made, and large in face and person. Her personal attractions were certainly of a substantial nature, but then Father Vivian was quite enough man of the world to know that she might have other attractions equally substantial. At any rate, it did not appear as if Mr. Marsh was at all likely to become a convert to celibacy in order to promote the union of the Churches.

"That young woman will be very much disappointed if he does," thought Father Vivian; "and I don't think our Church will

gain so much in Mr. Marsh that it would be worth while depriving her of him."

Nelly's appearance at Summerly Cottage had been a source of as great astonishment to herself as to any one there. She had to thank her Cousin Arnold for it. She had resigned herself to the disappointment of not going, but she could not help showing that it was a disappointment, and her father, who saw that he had grieved her by the refusal, consulted her cousin as to the best means of turning her attention to something else. Mr. Arnold Ensdell's advice was to attempt nothing of the kind, but to allow her to accompany Mrs. Winthrop to Summerly Cottage.

"You can tell her, if you please, sir, not to join the sisterhood without your approval; but I doubt whether even that will be necessary. Nelly is not of the stuff out of which pseudo-Catholic devotees are made, and, un-

less I am very much mistaken, she will see and hear quite enough in this one visit to prevent her troubling you any more on the subject."

Nelly followed Mrs. Winthrop into the room, looking flushed and shy as she met the many eyes turned on her. It was an embarrassing position for a young girl to feel herself the chief object of interest, and to know how much importance had been attached to her coming. Mrs. Winthrop was in a little nervous flutter. She was almost as much disconcerted as her charge at the sensation their arrival manifestly created, but she was a little elated, too, at finding herself of so much importance. She took the seat assigned her near Mrs. Orley. Mr. Marsh sat on that lady's right, but he rose to give the post of honour up to Nelly, who declined it with a little bow, and slipping past, took a seat in a more retired portion

of the room, near some pleasant-looking girls, who, with their mother, had taken no active share in the proceedings. Indeed, they felt that they had scarcely any right to be there at all, and had shrunk at first from joining the meeting.

The truth was they were Dissenters, who had resided only a short time in Summerly. Now Dissenters, as a rule, let their position be what it might, were not visited in Summerly by the Church people; and since Mr. Marsh's arrival in the village this rule had been more rigidly observed than ever, and by none more strictly than the Miss Werners. But there is a difference even in Dissenters. The Misses Hammond and their widowed mamma were ladies—there was no question of that—well educated, and in the possession of fairly comfortable means. All these advantages would, however, have availed them little. Other Dissenters had come into the

place before now who possessed as many. But Mrs. Hammond's only son was at Cambridge, with a view to preparation for the bar, and young men were very scarce at Summerly, and Dissenters who had a son and brother at Cambridge were to be regarded in a very different light to Dissenters who had nothing of the kind. They were worth taking a little trouble with, in the hope of turning them from the error of their ways, and were not to be dealt with in that rigorous spirit which, as regarded other Dissenters, had openly avowed that they were to be shut out from good society both in this world and the next. The Miss Werners looked at the matter in that light, and really showed their good sense in so doing. Bessy, the youngest, was five-and-twenty, and her sister ten years older, while neither of them had ever received an offer in her life; consequently no

chance that might throw a Cambridge student in their way was altogether to be neglected. Therefore they had called on Mrs. Hammond, and done their best to get on sociable terms with the girls; and when the new sisterhood was talked of, had prevailed on Mrs. Orley first to write an invitation to Mrs. Hammond to attend the meeting at her house, and then had used all their influence with that lady to induce her to do so.

Mrs. Hammond was very anxious to do good, and to be on friendly terms with her neighbours, but she felt that joining the sisterhood would be equivalent to giving in her adherence to the Church, and it was a long while before the Miss Werners could prevail on her even to attend the meeting. The girls were more easily won over. Social martyrdom is, perhaps, the hardest of all to endure, and as society was constituted

at Summerly, if they had not mixed with Church people, they would have been nearly shut out from any of their own standing. Therefore, they had urged their mother to come—it would be ungracious to refuse to attend the first meeting—they could do as they pleased about joining the sisterhood afterwards; but let them at any rate go and hear what it would be proposed that it should do.

But the girls, as well as their mother, were wishing themselves away long before Nelly's arrival at Summerly Cottage. It was one thing to do good, but another to do it by such means and in such a manner as that by which the sisterhood was to carry out its operations. It was one thing to show that they were ready to help in well-doing, and co-operate with their neighbours in all things lawful, and another to hear that one of the chief objects of the sister-

hood would be the opening the eyes of all recusants from the Church to the eternal perdition they were bringing on themselves by attending any ministry but that divinely appointed for them. They made room for Nelly readily enough on the couch where they were seated. She felt as if she was deriving some protection from the gentle-looking girls and their mother. It was so dreadful to have every one staring at her, and Mr. Marsh commencing to recapitulate for her benefit all that had been done before she came into the room. If people would only take no notice of her, if they would only forget that she was Miss Stanton of the Oaks, and treat her like any other young girl who had come there simply to be put in the way of doing right, and giving what small help she could, how much better and pleasanter it would have been.

Next came the question of the dress.

They were all unanimous in agreeing that it would be an excellent thing to have a distinctive robe for the sisterhood, Mrs. Winthrop timidly suggesting that it should not be black, as that caught the dust so terribly. Mrs. Hammond, however, ventured to remark that if they had a dress to be worn only in exceptional cases, and when the sisterhood was employed in its work, it would look as though they were not sufficiently mindful of the Scriptural injunction to give their alms in secret, and to keep their right hand in ignorance of what the left was doing. Would it not appear as if they were each resolved that not only their own right hand, but everybody else's, should know what they were about? But this idea was eagerly negatived by all the ladies; while Mr. Marsh represented that, like all other Scriptural teachings, it was to be regarded with a view to its applicability and fitness in varying cir-

cumstances. Mrs. Hammond felt more uncomfortable than ever—it was not so she read her Bible; but she sat quiet for the remainder of the meeting, wishing with all her heart she had never attended it; and the subject of the dress was resumed.

Of what should it consist? That was the important question now; and everybody had an opinion of her own on the matter. Mrs. Orley, however, intimated that she had given the question much serious thought, and had a costume to suggest which she thought would combine the different merits of economy, durability, and appropriateness. Some of the younger ladies waited rather dubiously to hear what Mrs. Orley had to propose, and that lady proceeded with her suggestion—"A waterproof paletot, of an iron grey."

"They're very warm in summer," observed Mrs. Winthrop; but her cousin

frowned her into silence.

"A black poke bonnet," continued Mrs. Orley.

Some of the younger ladies groaned, and Mrs. Neale, a tall, stout lady, whose bonnets were anything but pokes, and whose chignon was a standing wonder to all the village children, inasmuch as it was larger than any one of their heads, ventured to inquire,

"But how are we to get such a thing on?"

"Cut off one's hair if it comes in the way," said Mrs. Orley, who was troubled with very little hair herself; "and thereby imitate more worthily those holy women of the Elder Church, whom we are humbly striving to imitate."

There was a general outcry at this, especially from the younger ladies. They were willing to do a great deal for the good of the Church, and in order to bring heretics into her fold, but this was rather too much

to ask of them. Some of the more outspoken ones—these were young ladies indebted to no other heads than their own for their hair—said that they would rather give up the idea of the sisterhood altogether than make such a sacrifice. Mr. Marsh saw that Mrs. Orley had demanded a little too much, but he hardly knew how to lull the storm which had been raised; and it is difficult to say how things might have gone, if Father Vivian had not interposed, and blandly suggested that as a bonnet of the kind Mrs. Orley had proposed did not appear acceptable, a small hood, which he believed was generally considered a picturesque, as well as a comfortable head gear, might be adopted; or, if it were preferred, a veil.

A veil! There was something astounding in the idea; but it was very picturesque. A much fitter thing for a sisterhood than a

bonnet, which everyone might wear. The veil seemed likely to carry the day—there was not a girl present but felt inclined to fall in love with Father Vivian for speaking of it. If he had only been free to marry, in spite of his fifty years, he would have been a dangerous rival to Mr. Marsh. Mrs. Orley proceeded to speak of the dress. She proposed a linsey, of a colour to match the paletot, scanty in the skirt, and innocent of crinoline.

There was an ominous silence after this, till Flora Bell, who had pretty feet, and knew it, hoped that, on the score of cleanliness, the skirt would be short. The two Miss Werners were both opposed to this; they were solid, heavy young women, whose feet were much better hidden under long skirts. So did Mrs. Neale. Then there was a serious dispute as to the merits of long skirts and short. Nelly was appealed to for her opinion; but she preferred remaining

neutral. Then Mrs. Winthrop was asked, but she felt fluttered by the tumult of voices around her, and quite lost her self-command when Mrs. Orley, severely addressing her, said,

"The plain question is, Lucinda, whether the dress is to be short, on account of its being kept out of the mud, or long, in order to give an appearance of greater propriety and dignity to the wearer. For myself, I incline to prefer the short skirts, on account of their greater utility."

"So do I," said Mrs. Winthrop, happy to be able to agree with her cousin.

"There is no question," continued Mrs. Orley sententiously, "but that short dresses are infinitely to be preferred, on account of their greater cleanliness, economy, and durability; and I opine that with the question of the merely becoming we have nothing to do."

This last proposition was not very cordially received.

"If you're only looking to the usefulness of the thing, Cordelia—" said Mrs. Winthrop timidly, and then paused, afraid to proceed any further, but her cousin encouraged her with—

"Go on, Lucinda; let us hear what you have to propose."

Upon which Mrs. Winthrop continued—

"It always *did* seem to me that for a person who didn't mind making a fright of herself—I don't mean to say it's my notion of what a lady should wear, but then, as you say, you only study the useful—and I'm sure I don't know any dress that's fitter to wear, when one's tramping about in the mud or the dust, and these country lanes are always one or the other; and though there's been so much said about it, that I should not quite like to wear it myself—especially the

—the—the pants—but then I couldn't belong to the sisterhood myself, you know, so my feelings would not matter."

Then Mrs. Winthrop hesitated, but Father Vivian, rejoicing more than ever that he had come to the meeting, interposed, and in his blandest tone—a tone which re-assured the poor lady, who never, in all her life, had said so much before so many—said,

"What dress is it, my dear madam, that you approve so much of?"

"I don't approve of it beyond its usefulness," said Mrs. Winthrop, "but it's—the Bloomer."

There was a general outcry, in which Mrs. Orley did not join—she was too completely overpowered by the proposition. Lucinda always was a fool, she told herself, but who could have expected such a piece of folly as this from her? In the midst of the buzz of disapprobation, which would have been

more indignant still had it emanated from any quarter but the one it did, Mrs. Hammond was seen to rise, and, followed by her daughters, make for the door. Father Vivian opened it for her, bowing courteously as he did so. "The only sensible woman in the room," he thought.

Poor Mrs. Winthrop looked very miserable. What had she said, that everyone should turn on her like this? And then she glanced appealingly at Nelly. Wouldn't she come forward and protect her? But Nelly was utterly disheartened and miserable. Was this all that she had come for? —just a question of long skirts and short, poke bonnets and hoods? If she could only have followed Mrs. Hammond's example, and walked quietly out of the room! But she knew that she would not be enabled to make her escape so quietly. She must stay there till Mrs. Winthrop rose to

go, and when that would be it was impossible to tell. Father Vivian felt for the poor *chaperon*, and came to her rescue—after all, it was only just he should—she had afforded him so much amusement. "I think, my dear friends," he said, "we are wandering a little from more important matters. Might not the question of the dress be reserved for some future period? Is there nothing to which it would be more advisable to give our attention at present?"

Then some of the ladies assembled looked at each other. There was indeed something to be discussed at that meeting—something which had been the real reason for their wishing Mr. Orley and Mr. Hubbard to be present at it. But who should dare to name it? Surely it behoved Mr. Marsh to do so?—but Mr. Marsh had some disinclination for the task. He glanced at Mrs. Orley, and that resolute woman was equal

to the charge thus imposed. "Sampson," she said, in a tone that made Mr. Orley feel he was indeed a Sampson shorn of his strength, "we wished that you should be present in order that we might acquaint you with our unanimous wish for such an alteration in the internal arrangements of St. Paul's as may enable such of its congregation as choose to carry out more fully than, unhappily, has been done of late years, the commands of the Church. We are speaking to you now not merely as an influential layman, but in your official capacity as churchwarden."

Mr. Orley groaned mentally. "Why had he become Churchwarden, and what fresh misery was to be inflicted on him? But he remembered with thankfulness that he was not quite so powerful as his wife would have liked him to be, and he ventured to remind her of the fact. "You

forget, my dear, that it may be necessary to consult the vestry—possibly the Rector and my fellow-Churchwarden."

He had been very supercilious in his treatment of Mr. Hubbard hitherto; he felt a great wish now to have him there, that he might find shelter under the shadow of his broad shoulders.

"As to the Rector, unhappily," replied Mrs. Orley, "we all know too well how worse than useless it would be to consult him. Neither does it appear to us that the Vestry has anything to do with ecclesiastical matters. We have asked Mr. Hubbard to favour us with his presence here, as it is desirable that no time should be lost in enabling us to carry out our wishes as regards a confessional."

It was well for that unhappy gentleman, Mr. Orley, that at this juncture his coadjutor was announced. He felt un-

able to stem the torrent by himself—there was every woman in the room, with the exception of Mrs. Winthrop and Miss Stanton, looking to him to carry out their wishes; and there was his wife's dull cold eye fixed on him full of threatening meanings. He had done a great deal to please Mrs. Orley, but to put up a confessional was more than he could do; but his heart failed him as he thought of the hereafter, when they should be alone together. He resolved to temporize. "Such a step requires some consideration, my dear. I should like to consult Mr. Hubbard about it quietly."

"Why not consult him at once?" said Mrs. Orley. "This matter of the confessional has been delayed too long. It is a crying disgrace to St. Paul's that we have nothing of the kind. No still, secluded nook for the weary soul to enter and lay down its burden and depart refreshed."

Mr. Marsh murmured his approval of Mrs. Orley's words, and so did every lady present but Miss Stanton. Father Vivian looked on with as much amusement and a little more interest than ever. Mr. Hubbard addressed Mrs. Orley.

"What is it, ma'am, that you wished to see in St. Paul's? I don't think I precisely understood what you said just now."

Mrs. Orley put her meaning in plain words, suitable to Mr. Hubbard's bucolic understanding, and explained that there was a quiet corner of the church near the doorway, which, if a stout partition were put up, would be admirably adapted for a confessional. The expense would not be great, and the ladies would readily meet it amongst themselves. All they required of the Churchwardens was to give orders that the necessary alterations should be set in hand at once.

Mr. Hubbard's brow gloomed over. The rich red-brown of his face changed to purple, and he looked first at his wife, then at Mr. Marsh, and lastly at his colleague, to whom he said,

"Well, Mr. Orley, how about this matter? Are we to put this thing up in the church, for these good ladies to go chattering over their own sins, and other people's, too, in? And who's to help them in this little amusement? Father Vivian, or Mr. Marsh?"

Father Vivian instantly disclaimed any idea of doing so. He had his own church and his own fold to look after. Let those who sought the benefit of the sacraments of his Church come to her—he should be glad to welcome them; but it was not for him to officiate amongst those who were still aliens from her communion.

The Father said this with the utmost

courtesy, but everybody present felt, with Mr. Marsh, that he was only there in a spirit of good-natured tolerance, and that his estimate of the Anglo-Catholic Church was very different from their own.

"I'm glad of it, sir—I'm glad of it, with all my heart!" said Mr. Hubbard. "There's nought in the world I like so much as an honest man, who fights under his own colours. Well, let it be who it may that every woman's going to tell her husband's secrets as well as her own to, I'm afraid he'll find himself in an awkward fix before long. Sarah, my woman," he added, turning to his wife, "are you going to tell all the ins and outs of our home—every time you scold the maids and your husband, buy a new bonnet, or grudge your neighbour a new gown, to any fellow that's nothing better to do with his time than to sit in that box they want us to put up? Your ways and my ways haven't

been the same for a long time, but I didn't think they'd run so far apart as this!"

Mr. Hubbard looked not angrily at his wife—she could have borne that better from him—but with something of fixed, stern mournfulness that smote her to the heart. Their ways had, indeed, been different of late, and it had been all her doing, and now they were to be further apart still. But what could she do just now? Her husband had said he liked a man who stood by his colours. In her opinion a woman ought to stand by hers, and her colours were those of the ladies round her, whom she would not desert, even to please him. It was very clear that if she did, this question of the confessional would have to be dropped altogether. Mr. Orley, even to please his wife, would not dare place it in the church on his own authority, and therefore the onus of the whole matter rested in a manner upon her

shoulders. She did her best to rise to her position, but it was not easy to do so, with her husband looking at her as he did now; but then every lady in the room was looking at her too, and awaiting her reply. Therefore, with a desperate courage, she said, "There are some things, John, in which I don't think a wife ought to study her husband too much."

"Go on, Sarah, my woman. You can speak out as well as the best when you like," said Mr. Hubbard. "I suppose this matter of confessing is one of those things in which a woman knows better than the Bible can tell her how to do her duty to her husband!"

"John, you know my opinion about the right of private interpretation," said Mrs. Hubbard—her words were coming more fluently now; she felt herself the champion of every lady present—even Mr. Marsh was looking admiringly at her—"and I do think

that if a woman feels that confessing her sins is a help and a comfort—and—and—a—"

"Spiritual solace!" suggested Mrs. Orley.

"Spiritual solace!" repeated Mrs. Hubbard, "she has a right to do as she pleases in the matter."

"Avail herself of the privilege," put in Mrs. Orley, who was longing to make Mrs. Hubbard's speech for her; but Mrs. Hubbard did not avail herself of the assistance thus proffered.

"And I don't think," she continued, "that you will have any right to blame me for following my own conscience in this matter. Every one's a right, John, to act according to their conscience. I think you must own that?"

"Decidedly I do," said Mr. Hubbard. "Do as your conscience tells you, Sarah, my woman, and I'll do as mine tells me, and that is, to take any fellow by the scruff

of the neck that I find you've been confessing to, and fling him into the nearest muckheap! I'm a quiet man, so I'll say no more; but I doubt whoever confesses my wife once, will think twice before he does it again."

There was an ominous silence after these words. Mrs. Hubbard began to consider whether propriety required that she should go into hysterics. But they were unusual things with her, and, on the whole, she felt rather proud of her husband. She was very angry with him, but decidedly proud. Mr. Marsh felt himself called upon to speak now, and began to say something about uncalled-for violence, but Mr. Hubbard interrupted him,

"I've said my say, sir, and there's an end of it—be he priest or parson that comes between me and my wife, he'll have to pay for his meddling, that's all. Now,

Sarah, my woman, if you've had enough of this, I have, so I think we'd best be jogging home."

Mrs. Hubbard followed her husband meekly, hurrying over her adieux, that she might not keep him waiting. Mr. Orley went to the door with them, and held out his hand to his fellow-Churchwarden—a civility he had never practised before. He had hitherto looked a little superciliously upon him—he felt that he could never do so again. Mr. Hubbard might be brusque and uneducated, but he was a man to look up to for all that—a man to respect and admire—and, oh! dear, if he could only say imitate. But there was one thing to be said, Mr. Hubbard had not married Mrs. Orley, and he had.

CHAPTER V.

THE ANGLO-SAXON ELEMENT.

MR. MARSH and Father Vivian left Summerly Cottage together. The meeting had broken up rather hastily after Mr. Hubbard's declaration of his intentions towards his wife's confessor. The descent of a bomb-shell in the midst of Mrs. Orley's drawing-room could hardly have startled the ladies there assembled more. Mr. Hubbard was a brute!—there was no question of that; a coarse, loud, ill-mannered man, whom it was a great mistake of the Vestry ever to have put into his present position. But there he was—no hopes of putting up a confessional in St. Paul's while he was in

office; he would be sure to throw every possible impediment in the way; and should he find his wife availing herself of Mr. Marsh's spiritual services as a confessor, there was not the slightest doubt that he would keep his word to the full as regarded the muck-heap. There were few husbands in Summerly likely to manifest their indignation in such a barbarous manner; but, still, there was no knowing what they might be wrought upon to do when they heard of Mr. Hubbard's threats. Even without going to the length which the Churchwarden threatened he would, and which indeed few but himself would have sufficient physical force to carry out, they might render things very unpleasant to their wives, and make quite a martyr of Mr. Marsh. Poor Mr. Marsh! They pitied him very much, and he pitied himself, and as he walked slowly along with Father Vivian, said sorrowfully, "I am

afraid I have a hopeless task before me. Such violence as this, at the very outset of one's career, is cruelly disheartening!"

"Well, my dear sir," said Father Vivian blandly, "you must expect a few little difficulties. They give an *éclat* and distinction to a cause."

A few little difficulties! Father Vivian talked as if the horrible and degrading chastisement which Mr. Hubbard had threatened was a mere nothing. And he was as serene and unruffled as ever as he continued,

"I should imagine that before you embarked in a career so likely to bring you into opposition with men of Mr. Hubbard's stamp, you were prepared to meet with some unpleasantness. The Anglo-Saxon race is a very obstinate one—a race that will see things with its own purblind eyes, and judge according to its own half lights—apt, too, to keep its word, especially when such

keeping involves disagreeable consequences to others. I look upon Mr. Hubbard as a very fair specimen of the Anglo-Saxon race—a man who will certainly keep *his* word to the full in this especial matter. Shall I be presuming on our brief acquaintance, my dear sir, if I advise you *not* to run counter to him, unless you are prepared to be one of the first martyrs of the Anglo-Catholic Church."

Mr. Marsh was not of the stuff of which martyrs are made, and he knew it—and knew, too, that his pet scheme of the confessional would have to be given up—at any rate, as long as Mr. Hubbard was Churchwarden. It was a great disappointment, and he felt it keenly. Confessing, altogether, might be out of the question for the present—he felt, as the ladies had done, that Mr. Hubbard's threats might stir up other husbands to resent their wives' in-

dulging in the practice. He walked moodily along, and had not proceeded far before Father Vivian and he encountered Mr. Harley of the chapel.

He was a good man, and a kind-hearted one—well-bred, and fairly liberal; but there was a little—just a little stiffness in the bow with which he returned Father Vivian's courteous salute. He did not like the Catholic Church, and he could not help thinking that the parish would have been just as well if a Catholic Priest had not settled in it. Father Vivian was quite aware of Mr. Harley's sentiments, and liked him none the worse for entertaining them. He was a man who could as thoroughly respect an open, honourable foe, as he could despise a lukewarm friend or a secret adherent who was ashamed to own himself such openly.

Mr. Marsh, who had passed Mr. Harley without a sign of recognition, was a little

surprised at the Father's courtesy to him. Nay, he even went so far as to express himself to that effect. Father Vivian looked at him with a little surprise, and observed,

"I have heard a great deal of Mr. Harley since I have been in this place, and very little to his hurt. It will be new to me to find that he has so comported himself as to have forfeited his right to such recognition as one gentleman and neighbour may well give another."

"The man is well enough, I believe," said Mr. Marsh, speaking from the height of his clerical superiority; "as to his being a gentleman—well—we of the Establishment don't generally recognise men in his position as such. They are of a different caste and tone altogether to ourselves."

Mr. Vivian bowed deferentially, as if he quite agreed with all Mr. Marsh was saying, though he was perfectly aware that

that gentleman's father had sold tape and measured riband behind a counter. Mr. Marsh continued, warming up as he felt encouraged by the Father's manner.

"But that is not to the purpose—as a seceder, are we right in showing him any courtesy that may lead him to consider we have overlooked his having gone out from ourselves, and even recognise his right to do so? I think not—indeed, I think not. He is an alien from our Communion—a rebel against the Church—is it wise or well to let him for a moment imagine we can forget his being so?"

"Well, perhaps if we were to look at the matter in a purely abstract light, it is not," said Father Vivian; "but I am not inclined myself to look too keenly at such matters. But this I need hardly tell you. My very walking by your side, conversing as I am doing now, is a proof that, if I err, it is on

the side of tolerance. Good day, my dear sir—good day. I have a visit to make here. I shall be glad to hear, when you can favour me with a call, how the confessional is progressing. But keep clear of Mr. Hubbard. The Anglo-Saxon element is an awkward one to deal with."

CHAPTER VI.

MARY NORTON FINDS SHE HAS MUCH TO LEARN.

"BY rights, Meg, I believe you should be a lady." Meg had attached little importance to these words at the time they were spoken; her mother had so often thrown out hints of her own importance, and her superiority to her neighbours, that she thought no more of what she now said than she had done before of similar declarations. But the words were heard by other ears than Meg's. The door of the room in which Mrs. Blount was lying being open on account of the heat, and Mr. Twiss, who happened to be on the landing, just about to enter his own apartment, he

paused to listen. He was not a scrupulous man, or a particularly delicate one, and therefore he had little hesitation in determining to take the first opportunity of ascertaining what the old china tea-pot held; and if he found anything in it likely to be conducive to Meg's interests, to see if he could not contrive to make his own identical with hers.

Meg had taken the tea-pot away with her when she left Swamp Town. It was a pretty thing in itself, and worth preserving; besides, her mother had set great store by it, considering it much too precious to be used as anything but a depository of family papers. Meg had opened it once to see of what these consisted, but was rather disappointed, though, perhaps, hardly surprised, to find nothing more important than a couple of valentines of a very complimentary character, and a receipt for the cure of

warts. She put them back with a half sigh, and the words, "Ah! poor mother!—she did like to talk large."

But the china tea-pot had held more in it than the old valentines and the receipt for warts, and on the very day, and almost at the same hour that Meg was sitting in her new home, exulting in its prettiness, and Mary Norton, too troubled and vexed to work, was hastening towards Mrs. Mayne's abode, to see if she could tell her anything of her former model, Mr. Twiss was examining, as he had often done before, some of the contents of the tea-pot to which he had helped himself within a few hours of Mrs. Blount's death.

"Something ought to be made of these," he observed. "When a woman's married twice over within eight months, it's queer if neither marriage holds good. The thing is, who was this Ainslie, the second husband? —a gentleman, I should say, by his writing;

the first fellow could only make his mark. Well, she bettered herself in one way when she married him, but she was in a precious hurry to do it. My gentleman might have got rid of her, if he had been so disposed, if it hadn't been for this," and he turned over an old ship letter—" perhaps he *did* get rid of her—gentlemen play dirty tricks sometimes; and if he did, not knowing what this letter told, why, Meg may be a lady, after all, as the old lady told her. She must have been a fine woman in her time; there must have been a screw loose somewhere, or she would never have come to Swamp Town."

Mr. Twiss sipped his gin-and-water; he always, if possible, had a tumbler of that compound by his side, to assist him when employed upon what he was pleased to term his literary work; and though the reperusal of these documents scarcely came

under that head, still the gin-and-water, he would have told any one who would make such an observation, helped to clear his faculties and assist his thoughts, and fit him the better to consider the work before him. He turned the papers over again.

"Shall I do anything with them? Can I—Mr. Twiss, that's it, *can* you? Here's the papers. Mrs. Blount was married twice, and it's very clear that if the second marriage was good for anything, her name wasn't Blount at all. Well, she might be a respectable woman, though she did live, and die, too, in Swamp Town—a place where, as a rule, they don't indulge in marriage at all; and this good lady, it is clear, was married twice. Well, let her be as respectable as she may, if Mr. Ainslie wasn't pretty well-to-do, where's the good of hunting him up and telling him he has a grown-up daughter, who, as far as looks go, is a credit to him?

I don't know—I'm inclined to try. His very putting the woman away seems as if he was ashamed of the connexion—and people are not ashamed of low connexions unless they've better ones. Miss Margaret left us in an ungenteel way, without taking the trouble to give us her address; and I apprehend that, wherever she is, Mr. Ensdell's not far off. He was a good friend to her—a very good one, and isn't likely to drop her just yet awhile—and if I were to find out that Miss Margaret Blount, or Ainslie, was a well-connected young lady, and perhaps an heiress in a small way, why, it might be a very good thing for her. I must find his whereabouts, or hers—I expect they're pretty much the same—and see if I can learn anything from Miss Margaret. And the first thing is to meet with her. She's not likely to be at Courtmain Street. If Mr. Ensdell has taken up with my charm-

ing young friend, he would most likely have changed his lodgings. Mrs. Mayne is no doubt proper and strict, as widow ladies ought to be; still she may know where he has gone to, and not know that he has a fair companion in his present solitude. Or if Miss Margaret is following the paths of virtuous propriety, by hiring out her very handsome face, Mrs. Mayne may know where she is. In either case, Mr. Twiss, the sooner you wait on Mrs. Mayne the better; but allow me to suggest that in your present attire you are scarcely fit to wait upon any lady. A clean face, at any rate, my friend, would be an improvement, and a shaved chin; although, unhappily, a change of dress is out of the question."

Mr. Twiss finished his gin-and-water, and then performed his toilet with the help of a small looking-glass, in a painted frame, hung against the wall, and which he had picked

up at a stall for fourpence. He buttoned his coat up to his chin, to conceal his shirt, which was both dirty and ragged; and as he fastened the wristband with a pin, murmured, "Miss Margaret will never sew me on another button! Well, she was a good girl in her way—mended my gloves, and did her best to show she was grateful for my teaching—she may find it useful yet. If she rises in life, she'll learn how much she has to thank her old teacher for."

He drew on his gloves as he spoke—they were a rusty pair of faded black, with many traces of Meg's mending. Altogether, when Mr. Twiss had completed his toilet, his appearance was not very brilliant, savouring of the shabby genteel, with much more of shabbiness than gentility in it. Then he put the papers carefully away, and taking a small stick in his hand, with its point worn away, and the remains of a tassel dangling

from its broken top, he walked towards Courtmain Street.

Mary Norton had been there before him. Mrs. Mayne was at home when she arrived, and very glad to see her, thinking that possibly Mary had returned to profess her adherence to High Art; in which case, though Mrs. Mayne no longer received pupils, she would have allowed Mary to return to the studio and work with her. Mrs. Baring was with her daughter, rather to Mary's annoyance, as her presence would render so much more difficult what she had to say. She felt rather shy of broaching the subject, indeed, and coquetted a little with her gloves and bonnet, which she had taken off at Mrs. Mayne's bidding, when she had told her to sit down and rest herself.

"I'll take you to see Boadicea," she said, presently. "She's finished at last; and if the Academy was composed of men who

had the slightest idea of what is due to themselves as artists, or to art *as* Art, I'd send her to them next year. As it is, I shall keep her myself till I find a purchaser intelligent enough to appreciate her merits."

"I should like to see her," said Mary.

"So you shall; and if you like, Mary—just to show you that I've quite forgiven that folly of yours in wasting your time so long upon daisies and primroses—I'll let you copy her—copy Boadicea! You may begin to-morrow, if you can get the canvas strained by that time. The days are short, but if you work hard, you may get her finished yet by Christmas."

"I—I shouldn't have time," said Mary, quailing in her inmost heart at the undertaking proposed; "and—and I've a red-breast in hand that I ought to be finishing now!"

"Frittering your life away upon inanities!" said Mrs. Mayne, contemptuously.

"I'm to have eight guineas for him when he's done," said Mary; "and he's very pretty!"

"Boadicea ought to fetch eight hundred when I am gone," said Mrs. Mayne, solemnly. "People will appreciate such a work when the hand that painted it can paint no more; but as to your redbreast—if you were to paint a thousand such, would Art be any the richer?"

"I should, if I got as well paid for each!" replied Mary. "But I wanted to speak to you about that girl I painted, Mrs. Mayne. Do you know anything of her?"

"I've not seen her for the last two months," said Mrs. Mayne; "perhaps she's got tired of sitting as a model. Of course it must be dreadfully stupid work when one has no artistic feeling to support one under it; and artistic feeling isn't a thing you could expect in a girl like that. She's not been

near Mr. Ensdell for that time, at least. I think he told me her mother was taken ill, and the girl must stop at home and nurse her. The mother ought to be either cured or dead by this time, or else have gone in the workhouse, out of her daughter's way; but those kind of people are so devoid of common consideration; she may be lingering on all this time, and Mr. Ensdell's picture isn't finished yet. Not that *that* matters much—it's a mere piece of prettiness, like a child's toy; but, then, art *is* a toy to Mr. Ensdell, and will never be anything more. He's been away at the sea-side for some weeks, and only returned three days ago, and it's my opinion hasn't taken up a painting-brush since he came back."

"I don't think Margaret Blount has taken to flower-selling," said Mary, thoughtfully; "and—and if Mr. Ensdell hadn't come back here, I should have said that Mrs. Blount

was dead, and that he—he must have seen a great deal of her, you know, and she is so beautiful—had fallen in love and married her!"

"What!" cried Mrs. Mayne—"no, George Ensdell is not a very wise man, but that would be folly even beyond him. Fall in love!—what's the last penny publication you've been reading, Mary?"

"The love, such as it is, is quite possible," said Mrs. Baring, who had been a silent and attentive auditor hitherto; "but the marriage—Mr. Ensdell, I take it, is a man of the world, which puts such a thing as that out of the question."

Mary Norton listened, wondering and scared. Was it possible—was it really possible that Margaret Blount, with all her glorious beauty, could have gone wrong, and that the ladies before her could treat it as they did? In their eyes it was easy to

see that the one unpardonable offence would have been Mr. Ensdell's if he had married the girl.

"What has put this nonsense into your head, Mary?" said Mrs. Mayne, sharply.

Then Mary told all she knew about the new neighbours, and her firm conviction that the lady who resided at No. 20 was Margaret Blount. Margaret Blount, in a dainty morning wrapper, very much improved and refined, outwardly at least, but still Margaret Blount, the very girl who had sat to her as a model. Mrs. Baring listened attentively.

"I've not the slightest doubt it is her, Rosa—I always told you what would come if you allowed her here. Have you seen the gentleman at No. 20, child?"

Mary answered in the negative.

"You may rely upon it that it is so, Rosa. Mr. Ensdell is master of the little

ménage in Kentish Town. Well, so long as he pays his rent, and don't bring the girl here, it's no business of yours. Mr. Ensdell's not a particularly wise man, or a clever artist, but I think you'll find that he'll always treat you with the consideration you've a right to expect from a gentleman."

Mary Norton listened with an uncomfortable consciousness that she was as innocent in the ways of the world as her sister had often told her. She had had a snubbing once in a way from her, because of her innocence—Mrs. Needham looking down upon her with calm superiority from the heights of her experience. Was this all that she had got by coming? Just to learn that if Meg had indeed done a thing, the mere thought of which filled her with such horror, it was no more than might have been expected, and that if Mr. Ensdell had led her into this wickedness and sin, it was to be

forgiven to him, provided he was punctual in his payments, and kept the offender out of sight. Presently, however, she said,

"But can nothing—nothing be done, Mrs. Mayne? Perhaps if you were to see the poor girl—she is so young—and—and——"

"Good gracious, Mary Norton! don't talk like a fool! What have I got to do with the girl now? Don't have anything to say to her yourself, if she comes in your way; and if you choose to go on studying the figure—and you'll never be an artist if you don't—never trouble yourself further about your models than what you see of them. There now, come and see my Boadicea; dear me! I've heard that the woman I took her from was a fish-fag originally. Do you think I ever troubled myself about that? Where would Boadicea have been if I had? And look at her now!"

Mary looked, and praised, as it behoved her to do, and then hurried away. She could not be induced to promise to return to her allegiance to High Art. There was the robin to paint first, and some hot-house flowers which had been promised her. And then the mention of the flowers brought the tears in her eyes, as she remembered how she had admired those at No. 20, little thinking of the price that it seemed Meg must have paid for them. As she came down the door-step she encountered Mr. Twiss going in. He looked so shabby and so sordid, that Mary wondered what he wanted there, till he asked her if the house was Mrs. Mayne's, when Mary told him yes, and he thanked her with a courtesy at variance with his appearance.

"Some one that's seen better days," said Mary to herself; "and now I suppose he is going to offer himself as a model to Mrs.

Mayne. I've no doubt she'll paint him. He's quite ugly enough for High Art; but I'd rather she than I."

Mr. Twiss was quite aware that Mr. Ensdell had apartments in Mrs. Mayne's house, but it did not suit him to inquire for that gentleman. If there was any thing to be gained by eliciting the facts of Meg's parentage, he preferred only dealing with her himself. Mr. Ensdell, he was almost sure, would know of Meg's whereabouts; but then if anything to Meg's advantage turned up, Mr. Ensdell might then choose to make it conduce to his. Therefore he preferred to learn what Mrs. Mayne could tell him; and on asking for that lady, was at once shown into the room where she was still seated in company with her mother.

Mrs. Baring eyed him curiously—nay, she put up her eye-glass—an ill-bred thing to do; but to a man of the appearance of

Mr. Twiss, it mattered very little about being ill-bred. Like Mary Norton, she resolved in her own mind that he was there to offer his services as a model—possibly as a companion to Boadicea.

"Only, if I were Rosa," thought Mrs. Baring, "I'd have him fumigated first—I declare the creature quite smells."

Mr. Twiss bowed very politely; then, as Mrs. Mayne did not ask him to take a seat, he perched himself on the extreme edge of a chair, and holding his hat and cane between his knees, asked her, in his most courteous tone, if she could tell him anything respecting Miss Margaret Blount.

"Good gracious! man, how should I?" was the reply. "Do you suppose I trouble myself about every girl I hire as model? I thought you'd come to hire yourself as one; and really, now I look at you, for a low-life picture in the Dutch style you'd not

be at all amiss—would he, mamma?—something after Teniers, now."

Mr. Twiss bowed and smiled, as though quite flattered by Mrs. Mayne's remarks; then he continued—"I should be happy to offer my services to you, madam, in that capacity, but my time is otherwise taken up. As regards Miss Margaret Blount, I have perhaps been guilty of an intrusion, but it may be of great importance to that young person's future interests if I am enabled to keep up some communication with her. As it is now six weeks since her mother's death, and nothing has been seen of her in Prospect Place"—Mr. Twiss never spoke of Swamp Town if he could help it—"since then I imagined you might possibly have taken her into your employ, or have recommended her elsewhere as a model."

"I know nothing of her—nothing," said Mrs. Mayne; "unless this, that some one

very like her may, I have just heard, be seen at No. 20, Elma Place, Kentish Town. Mind, I don't say it's her, so don't be too sure; but I'm told it's a wonderful likeness."

Mr. Twiss bowed his thanks for the information, then rose to take his leave. Mrs. Mayne followed him to the door, a civility she had not vouchsafed to Mary Norton—but she was concerned for the safety of the umbrellas in the hall—and then returned to her mother with, "Well, that man would *not* make a bad model; but what on earth can he want with the girl? I expect there's very little doubt indeed that she's located at Elma Place."

"I wish, Rosa—I *do* wish that I could teach you to have some regard to the fitness of things," said Mrs. Baring, mournfully. "You've sent that shabby, dirty fellow to a house where his interference may possibly be a source of great annoyance to a gentle-

man who, as far, at least, as you are concerned, has always studied *les bienséances* and proprieties. If that wretched girl *is* there, what business is it of yours? And if Mr. Ensdell has chosen to act—well, as single gentlemen *do* act occasionally—why need you be the means of causing him any unpleasantness? You really deserve—you do indeed—that he should give you notice next quarter-day."

"I wish, mamma, you'd been half as considerate to poor papa," said Mrs. Mayne —"he'd have had a much quieter life of it."

"Rosa!" cried Mrs. Baring, rising and adjusting her bonnet by the glass. "You forget—your father was a married man."

"Oh! I don't forget it, mamma; and I'm sure you took care he never should. As to Mr. Ensdell, let him look out for himself. If gentlemen will indulge in these

little amusements, they can't always do so with impunity. He's spoiled that girl as a model, and for those who liked that style she would have made a splendid one. I shan't be at all sorry if Mr. Ensdell does receive a little annoyance from his inamorata's relations. I wonder what this dirty little man is? Her uncle, perhaps—possibly her father-in-law. I wish Mr. Ensdell joy of his acquaintance!"

Meanwhile Mr. Twiss was retracing his steps homewards, very well satisfied with the information he had acquired from Mrs. Mayne.

"No. 20, Elma Place. I'll make a note of it, and go that way to-morrow. I won't call till I've made sure that Miss Margaret is really there. No. 20. I must pick up an acquaintance with the maids next door, and see what they know of their neighbours. Business is slack just now, so I shall have

time to follow up this little job. Yes, I'll go on with it to-morrow!"

But before that morrow came, Mr. Twiss had other affairs nearer to himself to think of, having been had up before the Clerkenwell Police Magistrate, on a charge of imposture and begging-letter writing, the end of which was his committal to prison, as an old and incorrigible offender, for six months.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT.

MR. ENSDELL did as he had purposed, and read Tennyson and Shakespeare to Meg, and let her read them to him. Thanks to the instruction she had already received from Mr. Twiss, and her own quickness, her reading soon gave him more pleasure than his did her. She had a rich, full voice, a good ear for rhythm and harmony, and a quick perception of emphasis. She entered, too, into the spirit of the words, and caught their meaning readily, almost losing herself, at times, in the characters whose utterances she gave.

"You would have made a splendid actress,

Meg," said Mr. Ensdell to her one day. "Have you ever been to a play? Shall I take you to one?"

Meg had been once or twice with Joe—to the sixpenny gallery—and she was very ready to go again. Mr. Ensdell engaged a private box. It was more expensive than the dress-circle, or the pit-stalls, but it was quiet, and to themselves, and there was less likelihood of Meg's being brought into contact with anybody of his acquaintance. Mr. Ensdell was the most gentlemanly of sinners. On no account would he willingly have allowed Meg's skirts to sweep against those of any dame or damsel of good repute and social position; he stood by his order, and was punctilious in his observances of the respect due to the women of that order. Therefore he took Meg to a box, where, though he might, if he saw fit, introduce her to any of his sex, there was no likelihood of her in-

fringing the *convenances* by coming too near any of her own.

Meg enjoyed the play thoroughly; and she enjoyed her own position at it. She thoroughly realized the comfortable box, the obsequious box-keeper, the ample space, the easy access, the contiguity to the stage, and the pleasant feeling of being shut in from the crowd around, and yet with ample opportunity to amuse herself by watching it, and she did not realize the falseness and insecurity of her own position. No, not even when Mr. Ensdell brought a couple of friends into the box, and introduced them to her, and they paid her fulsome compliments, and showed their admiration of her in a manner that others, even if they had been as unhappily situated as was Meg, would have resented as an insult. She thought them rude and disagreeable, and hoped Mr. Ensdell would not let them come

near her again; but she knew too little of the ways men—even such men as these—have with women they respect, to understand rightly their bearing towards herself. She went through the ceremony of introduction very well. Mr. Ensdell had given her one or two hints on the subject of deportment, and as she did not like these men she kept silent, and looked towards the stage, and altogether so comported herself, that Mr. Ensdell's friends felt themselves rather put down, and after awhile slipped out of the box, and left Meg free to hear all that was passing on the stage, undisturbed by their conversation.

Mr. Ensdell enjoyed himself very much the early part of the evening. Meg looked superb in her evening dress, simple as it was; her shoulders were magnificent, and her head set so well upon them. A great many people looked at her, and Mr. Ens-

dell was very well satisfied to see them so looking; and he liked the manner in which she had received his friends, and the silence with which she had ignored their impertinences. He had been half afraid that she would giggle, or look awkward, but she had done nothing of the kind.

"That girl should have been born a princess of the blood Royal," he thought; "she looks just fit to *faire spectacle*, and sit unmoved with a thousand eyes upon her."

He was very proud of Meg, and very well satisfied with himself for having found such a jewel; and he looked around the house again to see what other eyes might be regarding her, when in a far corner of the pit he espied his half-brother Arnold, who appeared to be entirely engrossed by the business of the stage.

"*Tant mieux*," thought Mr. Ensdell; "Arnold's ideas are, to say the least, rather pe-

culiar. There's no knowing what view he might take of things as they are in this box. If it were old Geoffrey Stanton I shouldn't care a fig. But then Stanton is a man of the world, who, unless he is very much belied, has had his day, and made the most of it; while Arnold is the veriest prig that ever looked sour at another fellow's sins, because he couldn't see the pleasantness of committing any of his own. I should not like him to see Mademoiselle Marguerite. All her beauty would not cause him to overlook the slight impropriety of the affair—and yet what does it matter? He must learn the existence of our little *ménage* sooner or later. It's in the nature of things for such matters to ooze out one way or another. It's too late now to consider. He's looking round, and sees us—recognises Mademoiselle too, I think, by the look! We shall soon see; he's evidently bent on coming."

Arnold Ensdell had seen his brother, and had a dim idea that somewhere or another he had met with the lady by his side. She was very beautiful—too beautiful to be easily forgotten; and then he strained his memory in the hope of recalling where he had seen that face before. Was she the Rebecca who was to make his brother famous among painters? Surely yes! And what did she do here? It was, unhappily, only too easy to guess at the step which had led her from her place as the artist's model to one by his side. Still, he would satisfy himself that she really was the same; and with that motive Arnold Ensdell left the pit, and found his way into his brother's box.

Mr. George Ensdell did not introduce him to Meg, and the fact that he did not do so was a significant one. He talked of the play, the actresses, the news of the day, but appeared quite to ignore her existence.

Meg never thought of resenting this—she liked very well to hear the two talk, especially Arnold, whose very voice had a charm for her. There was something in Arnold Ensdell that won upon all women. It was not his misfortunes, for few knew of them—neither were they of the romantic character most likely to interest their sympathies; and it was not his looks, for few would have called him handsome; and it was not that he took any especial pains to please them, for, as a rule, Arnold seldom talked to women when there were men in the way. But there was a gentle, innate tenderness about his courtesy which made each woman he came near instinctively feel that he would have made a good brother, and even a better son, and that to any one in need of care or help, their being so would have been an all-sufficient claim upon him. And Arnold had a great merit—a much rarer one with men

in these days than in the past—he never let a woman feel that he forgot or ignored her presence. He was not much given to slang or light talk at any time; but no woman ever heard either from his lips. And it was the womanhood alone—placed as it were on a pedestal—not the social position which might chance to be its adjunct; and if he came across womanhood which had been false and pitiless to itself, so much the more was he true and pitiful. If he could not give respect, there was the more need to give compassion.

Meg felt intuitively that Mr. Arnold Ensdell was pitying her—and why should he? She was well-dressed, and better off, if he knew all, than ever she had been in all her life. As to her past troubles, what did he know of them? He knew nothing of Joe and baby—how was he to tell that she never saw a child without feeling the

bitter tears welling up into her eyes as she remembered her own little one?—or that all the fine dresses and pretty things which Mr. Ensdell gave her, would gladly have been given up could she only have shared the room in Swamp Town again with Joe? Why should he pity her?—why did he look at her with those great, sad eyes? But how beautiful they were, and how unlike his brother's! Presently Arnold came and spoke to her—he had a very sweet, mellow voice—and Meg was pleased that he did so, and looked up with a flush and a smile as he addressed her.

"Do you like the performance to-night? Are you fond of the theatre?"

"I like it all—everything," said Meg, her enthusiasm conquering her shyness. "I think I would come every night if I could. The ladies are so lovely; and wasn't the singing fine?"

"If you are fond of singing, you would prefer the Opera. Have you ever been there?" asked Arnold Ensdell, eyeing her curiously. She was such an untaught creature, evidently. The more shame to his brother, if things really were as they appeared.

Meg shook her head. "I don't know what the Opera is—it can't be better than this, can it? I am to go to a concert soon. Mr. Ensdell has promised to take me. I think singing's the finest thing in the world next to painting."

Mr. George Ensdell broke in with some observation addressed to his brother. He was not altogether pleased at the readiness with which Meg had entered into conversation with him. But Arnold Ensdell, the little time he remained in the box, directed his attention exclusively to the stage, sitting in a silence only broken by monosyllables.

It was not long, however, before he rose to go, saying, as he did so, to his brother,

"What time shall I be most likely to find you in Courtmain Street to-morrow?"

"Any time from one to four," was the reply, given with apparent readiness, though Mr. George Ensdell felt that his brother would very likely have more to say about Meg than it would altogether please him to hear.

CHAPTER VIII.

GOOD COUNSEL ILL RECEIVED.

IT was a piece of mere Quixotism on Arnold Ensdell's part to visit his brother. the next day. What good could he do by going? He asked himself this repeatedly. But then, on the other hand, what right had he to stop away? If things were as they appeared, it was not likely that his brother would throw up his connection with Meg to please him; but if they were not—if the border land between temptation and fruition were not yet passed, he might be in time to save this girl. At least, he would try.

He worked hard that morning, to earn the time in which to do so. A brief of some im-

portance had come in the preceding evening, and to do it justice, and yet not neglect Meg, he had risen some hours earlier than usual. This brief might pave the way to better things, coming as it did from a legal firm of some importance; or it might only be as other matters had been, a transient gleam of success, and the prelude of disappointment. However, he must do his best for it, just the same; and accordingly he had bestowed some hours of hard, solid work upon it before half the occupants of the chambers around had risen; and when his laundress came to light his fire she found he had already done so, and was sitting surrounded by his books and papers.

The woman was very ready to hurry over her ministrations, as she was desired to do, and after placing his spare breakfast ready, went away; and Arnold, after a while, arose to partake of it.

All the surroundings of his chamber, all the adjuncts of the meal, were on a very different scale from the luxurious appointments of George Ensdell's rooms and table. There could be little doubt in the mind of any one who looked around that Arnold Ensdell was either a very poor or a very parsimonious man. The chambers themselves were at the very top of the house, and the small clerk who served him did duty for two other juniors as well. The furniture had seen hard service in the time of the last occupant of the rooms, and had never been worth much. There was a total lack of all the adornments and elegancies in which his elder brother delighted, the one sole "thing of beauty" in the room being a cluster of late autumn flowers on the table, which his cousin Eleanor had given him on his last visit to the Grange. He looked at the flowers, and smiled, as he might have done had

their donor been present. Arnold Ensdell's smile always made his face look handsome —at least, in the eyes of every woman who saw it. It was that smile, with its mingled sweetness and sadness, that had won Eleanor Stanton's heart before she knew it. There were plenty of books in the room—books to a man like Arnold Ensdell were almost as much a necessary of life as his daily bread. But in addition to those cherished favourites, whom he had strained his purse to purchase, were a number of volumes of a lighter kind. Arnold Ensdell was very glad to eke out his slender income by reviewing even such ephemeral productions as three-volume novels, and though he would never be a master in his craft; having, unhappily for himself, an idea that the first essential in reviewing is to do justice to the author—an idea which was rather in the way at times, when a telling article was re-

quired of him—still, he found occasional employment in this way. He took up one of these volumes now, and perused it while he ate his dry toast and sipped his tea. It had to be reviewed by night, and there was some hours' work before him with the brief. It was a trashy, flimsy novel, but it had to be done justice to, nevertheless, and its merits, such as they were, dealt fairly with. With that and the brief, it would be a hard matter to find time to spare for his visit to his brother; but the time must be found; and therefore, hurrying over his frugal breakfast, Arnold threw aside the novel, and again resumed his labours with the brief.

At two o'clock *that* was nearly disposed of. He should have to attend at his leader's chambers for a consultation after his visit to his brother; then there would be the novel, two more volumes to wade through to get the gist of the plot, and then to prepare his

estimate of it for the *Argus*. If he could only have brought himself to throw it aside as utterly unreadable after the perusal of the first fifty pages, as half its critics would do, it would have saved him some hours of dreary work. But dreary as the work might be, it had to be done as conscientiously as if it was as sheer a labour of love as the perusal of a book written by any of the masters in the craft of fiction would have been. As conscientiously, but more tenderly. It would be so very hard to reconcile his duty to the public with some consideration to the author. It went sorely against the grain of Arnold Ensdell's nature to have to wield the scourge.

Mr. George Ensdell was at home when his brother called. He was not much in Courtmain Street now; but still he painted in the studio occasionally, and his letters were always directed there. Mrs. Baring and

Mrs. Mayne drew their own conclusions from his absence, but made no remarks upon it. He was very punctual in his payments, gave less trouble than ever, and was politeness itself whenever he met the ladies. A model lodger, in fact—one whose little irregularities, provided he continued to manage them with the discretion he had hitherto shewn, ought not to be inquired into too curiously, according to Mrs. Baring; while Mrs. Mayne so far agreed with her mother, as to observe that as long as matters went on as they were doing in her house, it was no affair of hers what Mr. Ensdell might be doing elsewhere; only as he had spoiled Margaret Blount for a model by making her his mistress, she hoped Mr. Twiss would consider it incumbent on him to resent the impropriety of his doing so.

The studio looked more luxurious than ever—more thoroughly the play-room of a

man to whom art was only the most beautiful and refined of all the recreations of his idle hours. It might be because it was now some months since he had been last there, but it struck Arnold Ensdell more vividly than ever with its contrast to his own dingy chambers, and their poor surroundings. Not painfully—Arnold's straitened means never weighed much upon him. He was almost Spartan in his endurance of the privations they involved. Wealth would have been a good thing had it come to him, and the graces and luxuries of life were not at all matters to be despised; but he could do without them, if need be, and feel himself neither the smaller nor the meaner man for having so to do. Luncheon was on a side table, as Mr. Ensdell had expected his brother's visit—and even this meal was arranged with an artistic eye to effect. One tall, narrow-necked bottle of German wine,

a bunch of beautiful grapes, a raised pie, a lobster, some dainty-looking bread—and a bowl of flowers in the centre. It was very simple, but so differently served from Arnold's breakfast, with its chipped plates and battered teapot, or the chop and potatoes which his laundress would give him when he went home. Eating was one of the drawbacks to life, Mr. Ensdell was in the habit of saying—it was as well to disguise its materialism by throwing what few graces round it we could.

But dainty and picturesque as the meal looked, Arnold Ensdell refused to partake of more than a few grapes; and, while picking them off their stalk, dashed into the subject which had brought him there.

"I want you to tell me something about the girl who was with you last night. Didn't you take her as your model for the picture over there?—which, by-the-bye, unless you

work hard at it, it will never be finished in time for the Academy."

"I doubt whether I shall send it to them," replied Mr. Ensdell, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I hate working against time—it is sure to be ill done—and I should keep the picture for myself in any case. And just now I am at a stand-still, for want of a model for Ivanhoe."

"And the model who sat for Rebecca—what of her?" said Arnold Ensdell, noticing that his brother evaded the question.

"Handsome girl, isn't she?—a face that would do as well for the stage as the studio," replied Mr. Ensdell carelessly.

"Yes, there is no question of her beauty—is she making the most of it by following her avocation as a model—or in any other way?" He lowered his voice as he uttered the last words, and glanced meaningly at Mr. Ensdell. The latter poured out a glass of

wine, drank it off, played with the food upon his plate, and then looking up at his brother, observed,

"Now, my good fellow, allow me to ask whatever business that is of yours?"

"None, perhaps. Only, seeing her by your side last night, dressed—I don't know much of such matters, but in a style that I should think an artist's model could scarcely afford out of her earnings; seeing, too, what an untaught creature she is—all the more helpless through her ignorance; and seeing, too, that a face like hers might lead many a man into folly he would regret, both for her sake and his own, when too late, I thought it would not be presuming too much on our relationship to ask you, if, indeed, you meditated this folly, to pause a little before plunging in it. She is so young, George—she can't be yet nineteen—and most probably has had such a training that she scarcely

knows wrong from right. Let her go—it is such a poor prize to lose so much for. Surely a prey so easily captured is not worth the chasing? George, for your very manhood's sake, you ought to let her go!"

"My good fellow, have I brought all this moralizing on myself because I took a pretty girl to the theatre?" said Mr. Ensdell, impatiently.

"You know enough of the ways of the world to be aware what the taking such a girl to the theatre involves," was the reply. "It seems to me that, even if you have gone no further than that, I have scarcely spoken too soon."

"I don't acknowledge your right to speak at all. If we did not bear the same name, it's the kind of thing I should characterize as a confounded impertinence!" replied George Ensdell, with some irritation.

"I don't often presume upon that, George;

and if I have spoken now, it has been out of some consideration for you as well as for this girl. I am not going to preach. I'm perfectly aware of your dislike to sermons, either in or out of the pulpit; you're about the last man with whom I should think of discussing such subjects as righteousness, wrath, and judgment to come—you would never expect the pleasant sins you commit to bring the two last down upon you. But this girl is so poor a prey, and the consequences of an entanglement—isn't that the word for such an affair?—would be so unpleasant to yourself when you are tired of her, as, in the natural course of things, you will be some day, while to her it may lead to results of which I think I need hardly speak. Am I in time, George, or have I spoken too late?"

"If you had been in time, your interference would have done little good," replied

George Ensdell, doggedly; "and—you are *not*. Now you know it all. I have my small sins, and am no better than my neighbours. You can't say that I ever pretended to be. When I am tired of this girl—and I agree with you that I am likely enough to be so some day—I shall not send her adrift to shift for herself, as old Stanton did his *chère amie*, when he turned respectable and settled down. The woman had a child, too—but I forgot, you were a small boy at the time, and I was still at Westminster. I don't go in for fine feelings; but Margaret Blount will suffer no such treatment as that at my hands, when it suits me to part with her. I shall take care, if she goes wrong, it shall be through no fault of mine. I shall deal liberally with her; and with her face and my training she might make her fortune on the stage; but she shall have no need even to do that, unless she pleases.

There, I think you ought to be satisfied with your *protegée's* future. I would ask you to come to see us (our little *ménage* is a very charming one), but I am sure it would militate against all your notions of propriety to do so. And now you have done your duty, and bored me terribly, sit down and make a lunch, like a rational being."

Arnold Ensdell was in no mood, however, for lunch. He had made an effort in behalf of this girl, who had so interested him, and failed. He rose to go, pleading the consultation he had to attend, and hurried away.

As he left the room, he again caught sight of the unfinished painting of Meg as Rebecca. The likeness struck him painfully. Mr. Ensdell had for once shown that there was something of the artist in him, after all. However he might have wronged his model, he had at least done

her justice on the canvas. What a creature to be made a toy of! What a face to bear the blazon of shame! What a soul to be flung in the mire! And Arnold Ensdell's own swelled within him as he looked again on that rare beauty, and the words unconsciously rose to his lips, "Lost!—lost!—lost!"

Ah! lost indeed! Pariah and outcast from her cradle! What chance of salvation had ever yet been offered her?

CHAPTER IX.

PYGMALION AND HIS STATUE.

MRS. NEEDHAM had been very indignant with the tenants of No. 20 for occupying the house, and with the landlord for having let it to them, when she heard the result of Mary's interview with Mrs. Mayne. There could be little doubt that the mistress of the house next door was, in common parlance, "no better than she should be." Mrs. Needham's very soul rose within her at the thought. The street had always been so respectable—every gentleman in it had kept such good hours, and gone so punctually to business; every lady could, if need be, have exhibited her mar-

riage certificate, duly signed and witnessed. She asked her husband whether people guilty of such improprieties as those at No. 20 could not be indicted as a nuisance? They were a nuisance, there was no question of that, and would ruin the whole street, especially as far as the servants were concerned. But Mr. Needham's replies were not of a satisfactory nature. He could neither be brought to write to the landlord, requesting him to eject the tenants at No. 20; nor to the master of that house, pointing out to him the desirability of his removing to a less respectable street, where the inhabitants would not be so greatly scandalized by his proximity as those in Elma Place. There was no help for it—things must be as they were; and all Mrs. Needham could do was to threaten her own servant with dismissal if she spoke to those at No. 20; to lift up hands and eyes, in

common with all the neighbouring matrons, at the disgrace that had fallen on the neighbourhood; and to charge her sister Mary neither to speak to nor look at Meg, if she encountered her. Mary promised obedience very sorrowfully, but she caught herself sometimes looking behind the blinds when Meg went out, with Mr. Ensdell for her escort, for a drive or a short walk. She was richly dressed now, with a bonnet that was the envy of all Elma Place—it bore so unmistakeably the imprint of a West-end milliner; and she wore her silks and velvets with an air and grace as if born to them, and the face was refining as well as ripening in its loveliness—there was always something about it now that reminded Mary more than ever of the look which she had once seen bent on Bailey's Eve. How could she have such a look, and yet be what she was!

Meg herself was blissfully unconscious of the disapprobation her presence in Elma Place had caused. In truth she had something else to do than either to be watching her neighbours or speculating upon what they thought of her. She was very happy in her new home, and very ready to make the best of it, as she had done with the smaller and meaner one which she had shared with Joe. It was astonishing how readily she sympathised with all Mr. Ensdell's refined and luxurious tastes, and how very soon she laid aside the tone and habits which had at first jarred upon him. She had an inimitable knack of setting off to their prettiest the pretty things around her, of soon learning how a table should be served and meals appointed. And she had good taste not only in her surroundings, but in herself. She acquired, almost as if by instinct, the art of buying suitable and

becoming dresses, and putting them on properly. And her hair; it was wonderful how many new arrangements, each one more becoming than the other, she had for it. In truth, Meg delighted as much in her own beauty as in the beauty of everything around her, and she had an intuitive perception of the colours and attire most in keeping with it. But beside all these pleasant cares, there was the process of development to be carried on, and Meg was now doing more for herself than Mr. Ensdell could do for her. Every fresh book seemed to open a fresh world, and teach her that there was yet some further knowledge to attain—some fresh difficulty to surmount. She delighted in history. Those old stories of Greek and Rome were better even than the poets. How she sympathised with Lucretia—not in her scorn of dishonour; Meg had yet to learn the meaning of the word—but in the

love that would not survive its forced disloyalty! How she grieved over Virginia, though she could not comprehend the meaning of her father's act! All those grand old myths, as we are taught to call them now, were Gospel truths to Meg. She leaped with Curtius into the gulf, and stood by the Greek mother's side when she sent her son to battle. Meg was a sheer heathen still, but was fast ripening into a very splendid one. Mr. Ensdell was charmed with the improvement, but sometimes she went too fast for him, puzzling and bewildering him by her questions, which often far outstripped his capabilities of giving satisfactory replies. Still he was pleased with his pupil —she transcended his expectations. He took great credit to himself for her progress, and, fortunately for his self-complacency, it never occurred to him that if the progress went much further, Meg might not be alto-

gether so satisfied with her position as she was at present.

But she was very happy now—so happy, that her memories of Joe ceased to trouble her, and she seldom grieved even for her baby, unless she saw one about the same age as that was when she last saw it. There was a baby next door, belonging to Mrs. Needham. Meg had seen it several times in the servant's arms. It was a delicate little thing, and Meg fancied she could trace some resemblance in it to her own. She had made up her mind, if ever she fell in with that baby when she went out, she would ask the girl to let her kiss it. Only she scarcely ever left the house but in company with Mr. Ensdell; he did not like her going out alone, and she was sure he would not like to stand by while she fondled the baby. Perhaps the girl might pass the house one day when she was at the win-

dow, and she would ask her to step in and let her take the child for a moment—only a moment. Surely its mother would not grudge her that, nor Mr. Ensdell be angry when she told him what she had done! He was very strict in his injunctions to Meg to keep aloof from her neighbours. He might have spared his cautions—there was little likelihood of their suffering Meg to come in contact with them.

Christmas came, and Mr. Ensdell, who was going to spend it at the Oaks, left Meg on the twenty-fourth of December, telling her he should not be away for more than a week. He would have been better pleased had he seen her more concerned at his departure; even a burst of tears, though trying to him, and possibly unbecoming to her, would have been preferable to the calm cheerfulness with which Meg received his adieux. In truth, she liked Mr. Ensdell,

and was very grateful to him, but his absence for a few days would have very little effect upon her happiness. There was a new book of travels to be read through. Meg had given one whole afternoon to the study of Goldsmith's Geography, and so had mastered the facts that the world was round, and that walk as far as she would, there was no fear of her falling off at the edge; and also that there were people who did not understand English in it, and were of different shades of blackness; so that travels were beginning to be interesting, as telling her something of the other dwellers on the globe; but she had also Macaulay's Lays of Ancient Rome to delight her. Meg, as she glanced over them, felt that she should very soon know half of them by heart. Then, too, she promised herself the pleasure of decorating the house with hollies and evergreens against Mr. Ensdell's re-

turn, as a welcome to him; and, above all, she was counting on the possibility of waylaying not only the baby, but the three other children next door, and giving them all Christmas presents.

She almost smiled as she bade Mr. Ensdell good-bye. She might have looked a little more concerned. He hated a scene, but even that would have been preferable to this calm, unruffled cheerfulness. He sprung into the cab that was to take himself and his belongings to the station, and waved his hand from the window. Meg waved hers too, and now smiled outright as she did so. Mr. Ensdell flung himself back angrily in a corner of the cab. It was very clear that, however much he might have developed his model, there was a great deal yet to be done before she would be quite all that he wished. And how was he to make her so? He had spared neither time, trouble, nor ex-

pense, and yet she evidently cared nothing for his leaving her. Nay, seemed rather pleased that he should do so. Had he a rival? But Mr. Ensdell would not do himself so much injustice as to entertain this thought. Besides, there was something so transparent about Meg, that he could not for a moment imagine her capable of deceiving him. No, he need not let this trouble him. He had, perhaps, devoted himself too exclusively to the cultivation of Meg's mental faculties, till she had learned to look upon him as a tutor rather than a lover. It was an error on his part, and he must set to work to rectify it as soon as he returned home. Meg would find it dull enough before he did so, when her books ran short, and there was no one to get her fresh ones. All the better for the continuance of the development in the direction he wished it to take. Then he thought of Pygmalion and

his statue. He had in a manner carved out his statue, for himself, from the rough-hewn block in which it lay. He must finish the work now, and wake the marble loveliness to life.

So thinking, Mr. Ensdell, who was now comfortably ensconced in a first-class railway carriage, drew his travelling-rug over him, and took up a number of the *Cornhill*, while Meg at the same time was sitting in front of the fire, her pretty velvet-clad feet on the fender, her silken draperies spreading wide around, and her beautiful head bending eagerly over Macaulay. She read for awhile with a rapture of delight, then half closed the book, and looked out of the window at the falling snow with an intense enjoyment of the present comfort and luxuriousness of her position; glanced round the room, as if the cheerlessness without doubly enhanced its elegance and warmth, and then took up her book again.

"I shall have such a good time for reading now. I hope Mr. Ensdell won't come back till I've read all the books he has left, and kissed that baby!"

Then she was buried again in Macaulay. It was very clear there was plenty yet for Pygmalion to do!

CHAPTER X.

MRS. VERNON.

CHRISTMAS at Summerly was rather a failure this year. It seemed to be the herald of anything but peace on earth, good will to men. Mr. Marsh and the fairer members of his congregation, were unusually liberal in their doles to the poor around them—so liberal that some of the working men thought their benefactions a fair excuse for throwing up work altogether, and luxuriating all day long in the beer-shops; and when they closed, enlivening the domestic hearth in the manner so peculiarly congenial to the British workman when in a state of inebriety.

Mr. Marsh and his hearers fully recognised the duty of charity; unhappily they only regarded it in its lowest form of alms-giving, and the Summerly poor of late years, thanks to the influx of the well-to-do middle class amongst them, had become so habituated to be petted, and fed, and generally looked after, as far as their material comforts were concerned, that they were learning to accept pauperism as a chronic, and not at all unpleasant, state of things. Mr. Marsh and his followers never used the expression "working classes," it had an unpleasant sound in it, savouring of independence, radicalism, and dissent. The working classes were the people who got up the Reform League, read the *Star* on week-days and the *Dispatch* on Sundays, who believed in Holyoake, or, what was almost worse, in Methodist preachers; to whom Bright was the political apostle of the nineteenth century;

who were great on the question of the ballot, and clamouring for universal suffrage as if it were an universal panacea. A troublesome, impertinent set of people to deal with, who fortunately were not to be met with in Summerly. Instead, they had the "poor," always "the poor," the farm labourers, the brick-makers, the carters and roadsters, who, on an average, spent more than half their earnings in the beer-shops, and let their wives wheedle and curtsey the deficiency out of the ladies who periodically visited them.

For, with all their vices, "the poor" were submissive and civil. The men always touched their hats to their superiors, and the women curtsied and told their complaints of hard times and children's ailments with a fulsome cringing that was sure to win its reward. And the children came to Sunday school, where, if they learned little, and

profited less by the spiritual instruction imparted to them, they, at any rate, never failed to bow and curtsey to their superiors, to say, "yes, ma'am," and "no, sir," when spoken to, and to profess due thankfulness for the tracts, the pictures, and, above all, the warm frocks and tippets given to them.

And "the poor" were easily brought to enter into their superiors' views as to the sinfulness of going to Chapel. Bringing them to Church was quite another affair; men were generally poorly on the Sunday, by their wives' accounts, and had to lie in bed to get rid of the "rheumatiz." Rheumatism, indeed, seemed a chronic complaint, recurring periodically to many of them, at intervals of seven days. As to the women, of course they had dinners to cook and babies to mind—it was scarcely likely they could come; but, at any rate, the majority of them were quite ready to acquiesce in the

teachings of their superiors, and not imperil their souls by attending the ministrations at the Chapel, when they were given to understand that not only their souls, but their bodies, would suffer for so doing. On the whole, the lower classes in Summerly presented a very fair field for Mr. Marsh and his followers to work in. They were quite willing to be treated as children, if they were only cared for as such. They received all the good things given them—lectures and visits included—very gratefully; and if they were no better for all the almsgiving, and the tracts the ladies dispensed so liberally, it was all the more reason these should persevere in their dispensation. Besides, was it not written, "The poor ye have always with you"? There was little likelihood of their not being in Summerly; at any rate while Mr. Marsh and his congregation went to work the way they did amongst them.

The Rector saw all the evil, and grieved over it more and more. And he was so powerless to set things right. True, he still retained a certain right of supervision over that part of the parish in which Mr. Marsh officiated; but while he saw the evil, he knew not how to counteract it. He told the wealthy that they gave away too much, and did not give it wisely; but he knew not how to direct them to give it better. He felt grieved and hurt when he saw the few poorer families who would still persist in attending Chapel, passed over, let their needs be what they might. Some of them were really in distress, and these the Rector helped himself, knowing well that Mr. Harley had more claims on him than he could meet. Then he found himself in worse repute than ever—looked upon as a traitor to his Church, a sinner against his own order. Even at his own end of the

village the fever was spreading—this very Christmas efforts had been made to decorate the church in a manner more in conformity with the way in which they did things at St. Paul's; and though the Rector was able to prevent this being done, declaring that nothing but the old-fashioned wreaths and clusters of hollies and evergreens should be adopted, and that neither banners nor crosses should enter the place, his doing so brought fresh ill-will upon him. Sometimes he felt tempted to give way. After all, had he done so well that he had a right to interfere with those who were striving to do better? Why not let them do as they thought fit? Was it not worth a little sacrifice of feeling on his own part to have peace and quietness in the parish?

But then there was the question, would peace and quietness come if he did give way?—and of this the Rector felt very

doubtful. There were more heart-burnings, discussions, and quarrellings in the parish since these new doctrines had found their way into it than there had ever been before. It was not only the Dissenters of all classes who were scouted with an intolerance that grieved the kindly old gentleman sorely, but the quiet, easy-going Church people who were content, like the first Mrs. Hubbard, to worship in the parish church after the plain and simple fashion which had satisfied their fathers, were looked upon as only a few shades better than the chapel-goers; and every instance of common civility or neighbourly feeling on their part towards these latter was stigmatised as latitudinarian to a culpable degree. The Rector felt, weak as he was, he was yet of some service as a breakwater. If he did not stand in the way, there was no knowing how completely the waves of intolerance

and spiritual exclusiveness might wash away every trace of good-will and kindliness. So the old gentleman nerved himself, not for an active conflict—he felt that would have been beyond him—but for the slow-sustained effort of passive resistance. *His* church, at least, should not be tampered with. Prayers should be read there and hymns sung, as they had been for the last three hundred years. They might call him, as they did, Erastian, Laodicean—nay, even Puritan, but this he could do, and this he would. Only it was a sore grief to him to have to do it. If they would only have let him end his days in peace, as he had always lived them! He was so unfitted for this work—why was it thrust upon him?—and again he reproached himself, as he had done many a time and oft, with the one false step that had placed him in a position which now more than ever called for the exercise

of the very qualities of which he was most devoid.

Ah! he had suffered enough—was suffering still, in atonement for that early weakness. His lines had not fallen in such pleasant places, after all, though they had fallen upon Summerly Rectory and its eight hundred a year.

The Rector was a frequent visitor at the Oaks. Not that he had much in common with its master, but he was a childless man, with a great love for children and young people, and Nelly Stanton had found her way into the very warmest corner of his heart; so she had into Mrs. Vernon's, in whose chamber she was a frequent guest. The two old people, indeed, spoiled and petted the girl as if she had been their grandchild. Her bright, glad young face, her saucy wilfulness, her very caprices and little petulances endeared her to them, and it

was as a matter of course that on Christmas day, when the sermon was over, Nelly, when she descended the little staircase appropriated to their pew, told her cousin Arnold to come with her to the Rectory, and wait in the dining-room while she ran up to see Mrs. Vernon.

The Rector was staying behind to administer the Communion, with sadly maimed and imperfect rites, according to Mr. Marsh and the St. Paulites, and Nelly and her cousin went across the churchyard by a small path which led to the ivy-covered Rectory. It was an old building, coeval with the church; and the furniture of the room into which they were shown, while waiting to know if Mrs. Vernon was well enough to receive her visitor, was, if not as old as the house, at any rate sufficiently ancient to be in keeping with it. Mr. Vernon had taken a great deal of the furniture

of the house from his predecessor's widow, so that it dated back to the beginning of the century; and the old, thin-legged Pembroke tables, the large, heavy sofas, the faded curtains and carpets, were all in unison with the still quiet of the whole place, which looked as if life had stood still within it for the last fifty years.

There was something on one of the tables, however, which gave the dull, faded room a glow and brightness, even before Nelly Stanton entered it. This was a large bunch of hot-house flowers, which she espied at once.

"Look, Arnold, ain't they lovely? I sent them here before I went to church—gathered them myself, and told Timms he was to tell Mr. Vernon they were not to be taken upstairs till I came. Mrs. Vernon will be so pleased! I always take her flowers every Christmas-day. May I go up, Ridge?" she said, turning eagerly to a staid upper-servant

who entered. "Is Mrs. Vernon well enough to see me to-day?"

Ridge smiled assent, and Nelly, taking her flowers, told Arnold to wait for her patiently, she would not be longer than she could help.

"Only it's a week since I was here, and I warn you when Mrs. Vernon and I *do* get together, one of us, at least, never knows when to leave off talking. I dare say you'll find something light and amusing in the Rector's study. I know there's the Fathers, and Gibbon's Decline and Fall. He took the books when he took the house. There's not one less than fifty years old. What a charming change for you from your three-volume novels!"

Then she ran off, as smiling and radiant as her flowers, and in another second was in Mrs. Vernon's apartment. It was a pleasant room, with two different views from its windows—one looking on the churchyard and

the church, the other on the open country —and opened by folding-doors into the sleeping-chamber. Mrs. Vernon was wheeled from one room into the other on her sofa. It was years since she had put her foot to the ground, and she would never leave those rooms, she knew, until carried out to the churchyard below her windows. It had been a long, wearying, hopeless illness, and it had been an evil thing for the parish that a woman who could have done so much good in it had been laid aside at the very outset of her career of active usefulness. But it had been borne very bravely by herself—very patiently and tenderly by her husband. It had not been without its uses, to those two, at least, however the small world of Summerly might have suffered through it. Possibly Mr. Vernon, in the early days of his marriage, had looked too much upon his wife as a mere Curate—more

as the helpmate in the parish than the sharer of his home. It had been somewhat of a *mariage de convenance* on his part—very unselfish, certainly, as it was formed out of sheer consideration to the needs of others, and his own inefficiency to supply them. And then there had come the terrible disappointment, when the zealous Sunday-school teacher, the wise but liberal dispenser of charities, the active manager of the clubs, the tender, fearless visitor to the sick, had broken down, and was prostrate and helpless the rest of her life, needing all the care and sympathy herself that she had so readily given to others. Then, and not till then, the wife found her rightful place in her husband's heart. She was loved for herself, not for what she could do. Her very weakness was her strongest claim upon him. He who would have been content to have been an old bachelor all his days, and had

only married for the sake of his parish, took up his burthen bravely, and gave to the weak, ailing wife, whose life people said must be a daily infliction to him, such love and tenderness as she would never have won from him had health and strength been spared her.

It may be that Mrs. Vernon had a dim idea of this—a consciousness, too, that, in marrying the Rector of Summerly, she had thought more of the sphere of usefulness opening before her than of the man through whom she was to enter it. She was a good woman, and an unselfish one, but she had not, any more than her husband, married for love. Her time for love, she had then thought, was past—his, he had fancied, was never to come. Life could be lived well enough without it; and now, in that sick chamber, it had come to both as the one great consoler for all that had been taken away.

Mrs. Vernon was by the largest window of her room—the one overlooking the fair Homeshire fields, now white with the hoar frost. It was not that she disliked the look-out on the churchyard—she often, when by herself, spent hours there—but this was Christmas-day, and so she had chosen to be placed by the other, with its more varied prospect. She was a small slight woman, not far from sixty, but looking considerably younger. The years which had passed over her in the changeless routine of those two rooms had left fewer marks behind them, for all their hours of pain and days of weakness, than if they had been spent in the busy world without. Her features were small and delicate. If you looked closely you might see that they bore the imprint of suffering, but still there was at times a delicate pink on the cheek, and a soft brightness in the eyes; while the fair hair, which was

smoothly braided beneath her little lace cap, was only slightly streaked with grey. On the whole, Mrs. Vernon deserved the praise which Nelly Stanton had often given her, of being the prettiest and pleasantest old lady in Homeshire. She had a scarlet flannel wrapper on, and her cap and collar were of fine lace. Her hands—they were very small and exquisitely shaped—sparkled with rings on the thin fingers, and the tiny feet were as daintily *chausséed* as if she thought that, being of no other use but to be looked at, they should at least be well worth that. She was not a vain woman, but she was a very loving one, and she liked to make her room and herself as bright and pleasant for her husband to look upon as both could be made under the circumstances. She brightened up as Nelly came forward with the flowers.

"Ah! you dear Christmas child! Do

you know I quite expected my nosegay. It is more beautiful than ever! Now sit down and tell me how the world without is going on. The Rector has brought me no news of late. I quite miss my little gossip. How is Mr. Marsh getting on? Have they decided on the costume for the sisterhood yet?"

She was a good woman, but she had a spice of mischief in her; and though she grieved with all her heart at the evil Mr. Marsh's innovations had done, and were doing, she could not help deriving some amusement from them—rather more amusement than Nelly could, to whom Mr. Marsh had been a great disappointment, and who had not yet recovered the vexation she had experienced at Mrs. Orley's house. She had been teazed a little about it by Mrs. Vernon, and it was a sore subject with Nelly. Therefore now she nestled down by Mrs. Vernon, and taking hold of one of her small delicate

hands, said, with a little petulance, "Don't name Mr. Marsh on such a day! I hate him, *maman*, and you know it. Christmas-day isn't a day in which to indulge in hatred, is it? Why can't you let me forget his existence for once? Ah! dear, that man has been the greatest disappointment in my life! I did think he would set me going in the right way—give me something better to do than reading novels, and taking care of Mrs. Winthrop—and she *won't* be taken care of, *maman*; she has a fit of neuralgia now, because she would sit in the draught when I told her it was not good for her—but how could one take as a leader a man who's only great in petticoats!—and who thinks his first duty upon earth is to dress himself and his sisterhood properly! *Maman*, I despise him! There! It's very wicked to be in such a state of mind on Christmas-day, but you shouldn't have said anything about Mr. Marsh to me."

"Ah! Nelly, I wish we could forget his existence altogether. I am afraid things were not as they should have been before he came. You see, Mr. Vernon is not young, and the work is getting too much for him." It was not for Mr. Vernon's wife to acknowledge the fact that, even in the days of his youth, the Rector had never been equal to his work. She was a very truthful woman —a little insincerity might be pardoned her in this instance. "But at least," she continued, "we had something of peace and Christian charity amongst us. I am afraid, by all I hear, we have little enough of them now."

"Ah! *maman*, if you could only be about again, Mr. Marsh would make little headway—and I think papa would let me help you, instead of leading the utterly useless life I do——"

Then Nelly checked herself. She had been selfish in her repinings, and had for-

gotten how painful such a reminder must be to Mrs. Vernon; but that lady passed her hand gently over the girl's hair—she could bear to be reminded of a fact that, with all its sad significance, was never absent from her thoughts.

"God knows best, my child," she said sadly. "I was so eager, so hopeful, so zealous in His service, and he saw fit to lay me by, as if to teach me he could do without my aid. Year after year I have had nothing to do but to wait for the last call, and bear, as bravely as I might, the burthen laid upon me. It has fitted itself to my shoulders at last, Nelly, though it chafed them sorely once; I have learnt at length that we may count them happy that endure. It is all the happiness left for me, but it is greater in its still peacefulness than you can realize as yet. The day may come, my pet, when you may do so; but I hope you will attain the knowledge more easily than I have done."

"*Maman*, you are a saint!" burst forth Nelly. "If you belonged to Mr. Marsh's sect, they would canonize you. But you haven't the burthen of self-reproach to add to your other troubles, and that is just what I have. My life is so aimless—so useless—what earthly good am I in this world to any one but myself? Oh! that Mr. Marsh!—I think if he had been different, and you had approved, papa would have let me see if I could do nothing to fill your place a little in the parish. But as it is, papa declares that to work with him would do more harm than good. I don't agree with all papa says at times," added Nelly confidentially; "but I think he is in the right as regards Mr. Marsh. Only, meanwhile, here am I, the idlest girl in all creation, wasting my energies and rusting my life out, just for the want of something better to do."

"The work will come to you in time, Nelly, if you are ready to do it. Keep

yourself girded and shod, my pet, in readiness. And now I must send you away. This is not one of my best days; and I must rest a little before Mr. Vernon comes. I must make his Christmas as bright as I can for him. Thank you once more for the flowers. How they brighten the whole room with their beauty, just as you so often brighten my dull life. You are not so wholly useless after all, you see, Nelly. What should we old people here do without you? To say nothing of Mrs. Winthrop, with whom you reverse the usual order of things so charmingly. Good-bye, my pearl, keep yourself ready for your work, and no fear but it will come to you in time; only remember that it rests not with ourselves what that work shall be. God has given me a very different task to that I thought myself the fittest for. Time will show what He may have in store for you."

CHAPTER XI.

LE DIABLE MALADE.

MR. GEORGE ENSDELL found time hang heavy on his hands that Christmas. Life was always rather a leisurely affair at the Oaks, but he had never found it so dull before. Mr. Stanton was indisposed the whole of the time—not sufficiently so to keep his room, but quite enough to make him a very unpleasant person out of it. He was cross, pettish, and unreasonable. Everything and everyone annoyed him. Mrs. Winthrop, who did her little best for his comfort, and was for ever wearying him to have medical advice, was snubbed for her pains with a want of politeness of which she

could scarcely have believed him capable. But she bore it very meekly—it was not in her nature to resent a rudeness to herself; nay, it was rather congenial to her to be trampled on—how else could she have lived three months the preceding winter at Summerly Cottage? She had her own ailments too—the fit of neuralgia having developed into a swelled face, which, when tied up with a black silk handkerchief, gave her a lugubrious appearance, that was intensely distasteful to Mr. Ensdell's artistic taste. Between his brother and himself there was a coldness which, if it had not been for the pre-occupation Mr. Stanton's indisposition, and Mrs. Winthrop's face-ache, gave both themselves and Nelly, could scarcely have failed to be perceived by them all. Mr. Ensdell had never had much fraternal feeling for his brother. He pitied him with a contemptuous *insouciance*, as a poor devil

who had failed to push his way in the world, and had a knack of making a mess of everything he undertook. Success, in Mr. Ensdell's eyes, was the one criterion of merit; and his brother had not achieved success. *Ergo*, he was not deserving of it. But that an individual so every way inferior to himself—he upon whom from his birth Fortune had delighted to shower good things—should presume to lecture him upon a trifling disregard of the proprieties, was an offence that, though he did not choose openly to resent it, he could not bring himself easily to forgive. He was not going to quarrel with Arnold—it would not have been worth the trouble; quarrels were in bad style, and ungentlemanly; besides, after all, was there really anything in the world worth quarrelling about? Not Margaret Blount, certainly, or his brother's impertinence respecting her. But there was a perceptible stiff-

ness and iciness in his manner towards him; and, occasionally, when only Mr. Stanton was present—even Mrs. Winthrop's presence would have prevented anything of that kind—he levelled a few sharp thrusts and sarcasms at the over-refined code of morals which it behoved a man who had the respectabilities to consider to adopt as his own, and impress on his neighbours. Mr. Ensdell's wit was not very keen, nor his satire very pungent; even had they been, Arnold's equanimity would have been little disturbed thereby. He had done his duty—a very disagreeable one, and had nothing but the consciousness that he had done it to reward him for the effort. He was used to failures, and the want of success here was to be regretted more on account of another than his own. If he could only dismiss the poor, frail creature from his mind, for whom he had pleaded so unsuc-

cessfully, there would have been no drawback to the few days of happiness which he had so long looked forward to at the Oaks. Mr. Stanton's querulousness affected him much less than it did his brother. He had never been high enough in that gentleman's good graces to be favoured with the choice anecdotes and highly-flavoured reminiscences of his youth. There was not very much in common between himself and his host; he had never found the amusement in his society which Mr. George Ensdell had hitherto done. Mr. Stanton had reformed, settled down, but he had not quite changed his nature when he changed his name for that of the uncle whose wealth he had inherited, and the remembrances of his youth were still pleasant to look back upon. He had reformed without repentance—at least, without further repentance than that he had thrown away a great deal of money, and

seriously impaired a very fine constitution. Well, his uncle and his marriage, between them, would repair the one, and country air and regular living might do a great deal for the other. So he had thought when he first embarked on his new career, and hitherto, though he had had to be very careful of himself, it seemed as though, after all, he might live to be as old a man as if his youth and manhood had been spent as purely as a nun's within her convent walls.

Consequently, he had hitherto been very well disposed not to be too severe upon the short-comings of others; and therefore Mr. George Ensdell, though his love for art—such as it was—had hitherto preserved him from any gross excesses, and the little *ménage* at Kentish Town was the first serirous entanglement into which he had been drawn, had still found his cousin's society very much to his taste, and was bored un-

utterably by it now. Mr. Stanton had a remorseful fit, and was inclined to take a very different view both of his own sins and other people's from what he had ever done before. He declared that he was breaking fast, and he was only fifty-five—only fifty-five, and with his constitution, if he had but taken proper care of it, he might have lived to be ninety. He improved upon the occasion for Mr. Ensdell's benefit, holding up his own case as a warning to him, which was doubly annoying, as at no time had Mr. Ensdell ever rivalled his cousin's antecedents. Mr. Ensdell was bored, and wished himself at Elma Place; but he had come for ten days, and for ten days he must stay.

Nelly, too, was perverse. She would neither tease nor be teased; a change had come over her. She was much quieter, much gentler than she had ever been before. She must be growing up, she was now

nearly eighteen—a young lady, in fact, tamed, and proper, and therefore not half so amusing as she had been before she was conscious of her dignities. Certainly Nelly was changing. Other eyes saw it besides Mr. Ensdell's, and to Arnold this change brought a revealing of his own feelings, which he was scarcely prepared for. Nelly had been his little cousin till now—that ten years' difference had involved so much—but he was beginning to find that she was his little cousin no longer. Something more than a pet or a plaything—was her womanhood coming to her at last? And was it this womanhood that made her so infinitely more loveable and precious in his eyes? Then Arnold took himself to task in earnest. If Nelly was not his cousin, she could be nothing else to him. He was a poor and unsuccessful man—no fit match for an heiress. This holiday had been a very pleasant one,

but the sooner it was over the better. Love was not a luxury that, as an honourable man, he could afford to indulge in for any woman, still less for one so dowered as Nelly Stanton. He was not in love yet—at least, he persuaded himself so—but there was safety in flight, and danger in remaining. He would curtail his holiday, and leave the next morning.

He had only been a week at the Oaks when he came to this resolution, and he had meant to give himself a fortnight, as Nelly knew. Was he tired of her already? Was a week of her society sufficient for him? She heard him speak of the work that required his presence, to her father, who listened with a careless weariness. He was so engrossed in his own ailments, that he forbore to press Arnold to stay, as he would else have done, as a matter of courtesy, and Nelly could say nothing. Let him go! If

he did not care for her, he should never know that she had cared for him. He thought her a child and a girl still. She would, at least, be a woman in her pride. Then she left the room, and locking herself in her own chamber, sat down and sobbed out her grief. He would know nothing of her tears—she might surely shed them here in peace. And then Nelly arose, bathed her face, and smoothed her hair, and looked anxiously in the glass, to see if she had obliterated all traces of her grief; and went down, feeling very like a heroine, and determined to carry matters off as bravely as need be.

Mr. George Ensdell, when he found his brother going, took heart of grace, and fancied that he, too, might beat a retreat. But when he hinted as much to his host, pleading letters received that morning as some excuse, he was met by a querulous outcry.

"What on earth do *you* want to run away for, Ensdell? Surely a few days quiet in the country isn't more than you can stand. Don't go the pace too fast, or you'll break down, as I've done. Eheu! I wish my time were to come over again. I'd manage matters so as not to be the wreck I am at fifty-five. What's the use of running away from the fresh air to hot rooms and crowded theatres? Perhaps you've some other attractions? Don't look at Mrs. Winthrop—she's always deaf when she has the face-ache. Why can't you stay here and make yourself agreeable? What on earth am I to do for any one to talk to when you're gone?"

Then, as Arnold appeared immersed in the *Times*, Mr. Stanton, accepting the fact of Mrs. Winthrop's deafness, went on with his self-bemoanings, drawing therefrom sundry moralizings for his cousin's benefit. It was to be hoped Mrs. Winthrop was deaf, and Ar-

nold too absorbed in his paper to hear anything—they would scarcely have been edified by Mr. Stanton's monologue. Nelly's entrance after a while put an end to it, greatly to Mr. Ensdell's relief. She, at any rate, was not deaf, and unless she were, Mr. Stanton must find some other subject to discuss before his daughter.

The evening passed heavily. Nelly did her best; but she had her own troubles, her chaperon hers, though they were of a very different order,—still putting the sentiment of the matter out of the question, the face-ache may be as serious a matter to a middle-aged lady as the heart-ache to a young one. Mrs. Winthrop sat on one side of the fire, and Mr. Stanton on the other. Now and then he lectured Mr. Ensdell upon the folly of rushing back too soon to London, and the advisability of taking good care of himself, while yet in the possession of health and

strength. Of course there was a wise reticence about these lectures, for not only was Nelly present, but Arnold had ceased reading, and before him Mr. Stanton, without knowing it, was almost as instinctively reserved as before his own daughter. But Mr. Ensdell understood the meaning of the lectures, and knew that his cousin was suffering twinges elsewhere than in his conscience, and that the lectures were the outpourings of a very uncomfortable state of body, which naturally disposed the mind to take an unfavourable view of most matters, and to have a little peevish satisfaction in imparting some of its own discomfort to another.

On the whole, Mr. Ensdell was unutterably bored, and resolved to hasten back to town to-morrow, even at the risk of offending his cousin. As to Arnold, he was making full use of his time and opportunities. It would be the last evening for many a day that he

should spend under the same roof with his little cousin, and, whether wisely or not, he would make the best of it. Happiness had been a rare thing to him, and if he judged himself rightly, a great sorrow was before him. But still the joy of watching Nelly Stanton was his for the present. They were breathing the same air, sitting by the same hearth, to-night. To-morrow he should be back in his cheerless chambers; not only with the world without, but the traitor within. Wisely or not he would give himself up to the enjoyment of the hour—let him suffer hereafter for his weakness as he might.

CHAPTER XII.

SPECTRES FROM THE PAST.

MR. STANTON went to bed early, to the great relief of Mr. George Ensdell. Mrs. Winthrop looked anxiously after him as he went,—she would have liked to have gone too; but how could she leave Nelly alone with her cousins? She looked pleadingly and helplessly at her charge, who for the last half hour had been singing one song after another to Arnold Ensdell.

Nelly saw the look, and was ready enough to respond to it. Her notes had run clear and full, but the sobs had been welling up in her throat the while.

She left the piano.

"Mrs. Winthrop, you're tired—so am I —come to bed at once, and Ridge shall foment your face, and I'll see you all warm and snug for the night. You'll be quite well to-morrow, and I'll send you up your breakfast in bed. Good night, Arnold. Shall I tell Sanders you'd like your coffee early? Perhaps you'd wish to leave before any of us are down, so I'll say good-bye to you now?"

She was perversely cruel—needlessly so both to herself and him; but Arnold could not bring himself to say good-bye that night. The morrow would come all too soon, so he told her he would reserve his adieux to the next day, and wait for the twelve o'clock train.

Then Nelly led off Mrs. Winthrop, and saw that her face was duly fomented by Ridge, her fire made up for the night, and her lamp duly trimmed. Then she went to

her own room, and dismissed Ridge, telling her she must be tired, and she would brush her hair herself. When Ridge had gone, she sat down by the fire, with her feet on the fender, and looked as earnestly as if she could trace out some likeness to Arnold Ensdell in the embers.

"Going to-morrow," she sighed; "oh! dear, he's tired of us all soon enough! I suppose there's nothing in this place to make up to him for his life in London, and the people he meets there. I wonder—I do wonder whether Cousin Arnold ever thought of such a thing as falling in love, and what would the woman be like that he did love. Dreadfully clever, and frightfully sensible, and—and—very unlike me!" She bit her red lips as she pictured Arnold Ensdell wooing some one the very opposite of herself—tall and stately, and self-possessed; a queen among women, and good and gracious too

with all her sense and cleverness. It was not a pleasant thought; but Nelly liked the self-torture that it brought—liked it so well that she sat by the fire for at least half an hour indulging in it, and at last took it to bed with her to brood over, till she had fairly cried herself to sleep.

Mr. Stanton kept a late watch too that night. He dismissed his man, as Nelly had done her maid, and, like her, too, sat by the fire and looked at the burning coals. They gave him very different food for thought, however, from what they had furnished Nelly; or, it might be, the reminiscences in which he had indulged that day occurred to him more vividly than ever now, in the still quiet. His meditations were not pleasant ones. It was not often conscience disturbed him—indeed, for many years he had almost forgotten there was anything so troublesome in the world. Was

it conscience now, or was it dyspepsia that was bringing before him faces and figures long lost sight of, and which should have passed out of his memory, as they had long since passed out of his life? Was it conscience that now bade him remember more daughters than one had been born to him, and ask what had become of the other whom he had sent from him an infant in its mother's arms? Had it died?—had it lived?—he should never know now. If living, it would be a woman by this time; and, if like the mother, a handsome one! Then he rose, and went to an old-fashioned India cabinet, and, unlocking it, opened a drawer, and took out a picture which he had not looked at for more than nineteen years—which had been buried in that drawer along with other mementoes of the past, and which would have been burned long ago, had it not escaped his memory.

It was the portrait of a woman about seven-and-twenty—a fair, round face, with a red and white complexion, and soft, brown hair—a face rich in a certain style of unintellectual prettiness, but devoid of all expression—an unmeaning simper round the mouth, and a self-contented complacency in the blue eyes. Not the face of a lady—though the little you could see of the dress was rich and well chosen—you felt sure of that. Sure, too, that you were looking on an uneducated, unrefined woman—weak, foolish, credulous, easily deceived, and incapable of any lasting feeling. Mr. Stanton looked at it for some minutes, not regretfully or remorsefully, but with a kind of speculative curiosity, as if he were wondering what had become of the original all these years. Still, he did not feel quite comfortable as he looked—the woman had been but a vulgar one; yet she might have some grounds for saying he had

deceived and wronged her. Two hundred pounds, after all, might not be quite a fair set-off against her claims. And there was the child—what possessed him to think of that baby now? It was, most likely, dead —it was to be hoped so. *What* was wrong with Mr. Stanton, that he felt some uneasy qualms, as the recollection of the lost spirits that haunt London streets came across him? Was it possible that this child—who, after all, whether he had duly wedded its mother or not, was *his* child, could be one of these? It was not a pleasant thought; and then there came another more unpleasant still. He must be worse than he thought for—he would send for medical advice to-morrow; he never had been troubled with such fancies before, but this one *was* troublesome, and would make itself heard—would whisper to him that it was just possible some lost and nameless wretch, whose life was one long

shame, whose existence was a curse to herself and all with whom she came in contact, might be not only *his* child, but Eleanor Stanton's sister. Perhaps with the same face, but brazoned with sin—with the same beauty, but stigmatised as a pariah's? Not eighteen months the senior of his heiress, but possibly so worn already with the burthen of her life, that she might be even then looking at the dark still waters as they flowed beneath some bridge, and asking herself whether it would not be best to take one leap, and so end all!

Mr. Stanton did not like such thoughts. He made up his mind more firmly than ever that Dr. Hartree should be sent for the next morning; and then he walked to the fire, stirred it into fresh life, and dropped the miniature he held into the very centre of the blaze. He watched it crackle and shrivel, and patted the coals down on it;

and when he had made sure that it was so far consumed that nothing but a black shapeless mass remained, he commenced his preparations for the night, and retired to such rest as those troublesome thoughts of his would let him have.

And the next morning Dr. Hartree was sent for, though not by Mr. Stanton; and there was a stir in all Summerly, from the brickmakers' cottages at the extreme end near Milford, to the higher and more aristocratic regions of the Common. The master of the Oaks had been found in his bed, helpless, speechless, motionless—a paralytic.

CHAPTER XIII.

GROPING TOWARDS THE LIGHT.

MEG had spent her Christmas very pleasantly, on the whole. She got through the book of travels; read Macaulay's Lays so often, that, as she had expected, she soon knew them nearly all by heart; and decorated her rooms with holly and laurel in a manner that won Mr. Ensdell's praise when he returned. Also, she began to acquire a new accomplishment. The under-servant Mr. Ensdell had engaged was a country girl, from Buckinghamshire, and she passed her time, when work was over, making lace at a pillow she had brought up with her. Meg found her at this employ-

ment, and the work seemed so easy, the result so charming, that she asked the girl to teach it to her. She had deft fingers, and a capacity for learning, and the mechanical nature of the employment, when she had once mastered its mysteries, recommended itself to her. She could think so much better while at work than when sitting idle, and it was so pleasant to think over what she had read when she had laid the book down. Meg's mind had plenty to do just now. It was always at work, grappling with some new difficulty, trying to find a path out of some fresh maze of thought—restless, questioning the why and wherefore of everything around, at every fresh step seeming only to find fresh wonders to unravel. This finger-work acted as a slight sedative; she had had so little for her hands to do before, and the general management of the little household resting entirely upon

the elderly servant whom Mr. Ensdell had engaged as cook and housekeeper, she was glad of some change from her reading. She wove her patterns, and crooned Macaulay over them, or murmured Tennyson, as the dainty lace grew beneath her fingers. It was ladies' work, too, she thought; there was something dainty and pretty about it that pleased her fancy. It was altogether nicer than patchwork, and she would ask Mr. Ensdell to buy her a pillow as soon as he returned home.

She watched for the children next door, but it was some days before she succeeded in waylaying the baby. Mary Norton had left Elma Place, and gone on a visit to the country, or Meg must have seen her, she kept watch so persistently at the window. At last, the day before she expected Mr. Ensdell's return, she saw the servant coming out carrying the baby, and followed by

the other two little ones. They were all going to their grandmamma's, half a mile off, and Mrs. Needham herself was preparing to follow. She had only just stopped to give a few parting directions to the charwoman left in charge of the house. But Meg was not to know this, and as the servant passed by her own door, out she ran, with her dainty silk apron holding the toys for the elder children, and a large showy rattle in her hand for the baby.

"Nurse, let me take the little one, and give it this. May I kiss it?—only once? Look, it likes its rattle! Oh! you darling! —how it laughs! Little ones, I have something for you too. See here, this doll and this horse! Oh! nurse, do let me take the baby for a minute!"

Mrs. Needham's Ann felt puzzled. What was she to say to this richly-dressed, handsome young lady, who stood pleading there

with eager eyes and lips, and outstretched arms, to be allowed to hold the child. She was a good-for-nothing, as all the street said, but what a love of a dress she had on, and how beautifully her hair was done! It was very hard to say such a lady no, and what harm would it do the daby after all, if she did kiss it? The little one settled the matter. It stretched out its hands, and cooed, and Meg caught it triumphantly from the servant, and rained kisses on its soft, velvety cheeks and mouth. Kisses and tears too! —as she thought how cold and still had been the last baby's face that she had kissed in its little coffin.

Mrs. Needham did not see the tears, as Meg was bending down over the little one; but her whole soul rose within her, as, on leaving the house, the first thing that met her eyes was her baby receiving the pollution of such kisses. For a moment she stood aghast,

looking at Ann with glances that would have reminded that unhappy damsel of the fabled Gorgon, if she had ever heard of such a being. A month's warning was written in those looks. Ann saw and trembled; but, instead of trying to take back the baby, stood helpless and open-mouthed, looking, as Mrs. Needham afterwards told Mary, "a bigger fool than ever." Mrs. Needham had many virtues, but patience was not pre-eminent among them. She *could* not stand there and see "that creature" kissing her baby, and wait unmoved till she chose to resign it.

She stepped quietly up to Meg, and without a word took the child from her. Without a word, but not without a look—a look that made Meg ask herself, in puzzled wonderment, what had she done to deserve such a glance.

She shrank back, cowering beneath the scorn and anger that flashed from Mrs.

Needham's eyes. That lady, having secured her baby, returned to her own house, bidding Ann follow her, and bring the children, when that luckless girl was subjected to a rigorous cross-examination as to the encouragement she must have given "the thing, before she would have presumed to take such a liberty." Ann had nothing to say in her own excuse, more than that "she couldn't help it—it was no fault of hers, if the lady would come and take the child from her." An excuse which her mistress told her "was worse than none at all,—only serving to show she was no more fit to be trusted than a baby."

Then the children showed their toys, which were instantly confiscated, along with the baby's rattle, and sent back to No. 20 by the charwoman, who was strictly ordered to give them to the servant when she opened the door, without saying a word.

Then the children roared, the baby screamed, and Ann cried; but Mrs. Needham was firm. As a rule, she spoiled her children systematically, but this was an exceptional case. She comforted the baby, after the fashion in which babies best love to be comforted, gave the children some cake, and scolded Ann—by which means she succeeded in restoring tranquillity in about ten minutes, when she again set forth, with Ann once more carrying the baby, and the children tightly held one in each hand. She passed No. 20, with head erect, feeling that she had vindicated virtue, and done her best to shame a sinner. If she could but have known something of that sinner's training, of the darkness all around, out of which, for the first time, she was trying to grope her way to the light, perhaps she might have thought virtue stood less in need of vindication, and have suffered her righteousness to

take a milder and less aggressive form.

Meg had gone back into No. 20 when Mrs. Needham had taken the baby with her. She shut the door, and sat down with a stupefied feeling that something was wrong, but where or what she could not tell. If she had been still in her old rags, she would have been less puzzled—Mrs. Needham might not choose a beggar-girl to kiss her child. But she had one of her very prettiest dresses on, looked as much a lady—well, perhaps more so—as did Mrs. Needham herself. What had she done that she should meet with such a look as that? Did Mrs. Needham value her baby so that she grudged every one a kiss of its soft, sweet face? It was very cruel if she did; but then she did not know Meg's loss, or she would surely—surely have let her comfort herself by caressing the little creature. And Mrs. Needham did not look an unkind woman either. Meg

had often seen her going to and fro, and thought what a pleasant, happy face she had. Why should she be so hard to her? It seemed such needless, senseless cruelty!

It seemed more needless and senseless still, when, presently, Bates, the cook—Susan having gone out on an errand—entered, bearing the rattle and the other toys with which Meg had presented the children. The charwoman had exceeded Mrs. Needham's instructions, and given a message of her own. Why should not she be virtuous as well as her employer? And what was the fine, dressed-up madam, that she should not hear a bit of truth at times? And Bates was in no wise loth to give the message. She had a good place, and plenty of perquisites; neither, on the whole, was she unkindly disposed to her young mistress; but, still, why should she not be virtuous too? It was the first time she ever had served a

"lady" in Meg's situation, and she was disposed to exalt herself on account of the respectability of her former employers, and the unimpeachable character of her other mistresses. Mrs. Bates was cross-eyed, and forty-five, and no man in all her life had ever once laid siege to either heart or hand; but she felt herself placed, as it were, on a very pinnacle of self-denying righteousness when she put the toys down on the table, and looking Meg in the face, said,

"Mrs. Needham's sent 'em from next door, and she says she thinks it was the greatest piece of imperence she ever heard of your giving them to her children!"

Bates would not have dared this had Mr. Ensdell been at home, but she knew that he was away, and had not written to Meg during his absence. In truth, letter-writing bored him, and if he wrote to Meg she would write back again, and there was

no knowing what a letter from her would be like. It would spoil all his memories of her beautiful face and dainty, graceful ways, to see a blotted scrawl, ill-spelt and ill-expressed; do away with some of the glamour she had thrown around him; and Mr. Ensdell did not care to be *disillusionné* as yet. Besides, what should he tell her if he did write?—what had she to do with his life at the Oaks, or the people who were there? So he kept a silence which never troubled Meg, but from which Mrs. Bates drew her own conclusions; and the result was the repetition of the charwoman's insolence. But she was not prepared for its effect on Meg. She sprang up and flung the toys into the fire, crying, "How dare she say so!—and how dare you tell me that she did!" Then, the storm subsiding as quickly as it rose, she buried her face in her hands, and burst into a passionate fit of tears, which alarmed Mrs.

Bates more than her short-lived anger had done.

"It was cruel—cruel—cruel!" she sobbed. "Why should she do it? What harm did the toys do the children, or why should it hurt the baby if I kissed it? And it is so like—it is so like the little one I lost. Oh! if she only knew how I felt when I took it in my arms, she would not have been so hard. Do you think she would, Bates?" she added, turning now for sympathy to the grim-faced maiden near her; "but she couldn't tell—how should she? Bates, did you ever have a baby?"

"Lord forbid, miss!—ma'am, I mean," said that virtuous spinster, looking aghast at the idea. "I've always kept myself respectable, and never had a word against my character, either from the ladies I've lived with, or in any other way. But ladies is particler, of course, about such things, and though

Mrs. Needham needn't have been quite so much put out, still, I don't see that there's much to be wondered at. I wouldn't take no notice of none of the children about here, if I was you, miss—keep yourself to yourself. It's by far the best way, and saves a deal of awkwardness."

Then Mrs. Bates left the room, and Meg remained alone to brood over the meaning of her words, and of Mrs. Needham's harshness. Some dim glimmering of the truth tried to force its way into her mind, but she had been so used, from the time she could know anything of such matters, to look upon a state of things like that subsisting between herself and Mr. Ensdell as a matter of course, that it was difficult for her to realize the fact that it was her connection with him that had brought such a rebuff upon her from Mrs. Needham. No one had ever thought she did wrong by living with

Joe, though they had never been to church together; and now Joe was dead, where was the harm in sharing Mr. Ensdell's home? If wrong there were, why had he led her into it? But there was none—he was good and kind; she did not care for him as she had cared for Joe, but she was very grateful to him, and she could not think that he would abuse his better knowledge by acting unjustly to her. Mrs. Needham must be a bad-tempered woman, and jealous of her children's love—did not choose, perhaps, that strangers should try to bribe any of it for themselves. But still—still, why did she look like that? Meg almost shuddered as she recalled the scorn that had flashed upon her from that quiet little woman's eyes.

The next day brought, not Mr. Ensdell, but a letter from him. Mrs. Bates made her own comments upon his protracted ab-

sence, but did not venture to utter them to Meg, who, however, was perfectly satisfied with the information in the letter, that he should be away from home longer than he had intended, on account of the dangerous illness of the friend at whose house he was staying. Meg was sorry for the trouble she supposed he must be in, but did not feel disposed to regret his absence on her own account. A fresh parcel of books from Mudie's came that day, and Meg was soon absorbed in their contents—so absorbed, that even Mrs. Needham's scorn, and the doubts that had begun to trouble her mind, were forgotten for a time. Mr. Ensdell had desired her not to write back—there was no occasion, and he would be home as soon as possible. Meg did not feel disposed to disobey him; she only hoped the holly with which she had decked the house would not lose its freshness before his return. She had

taken a great deal of trouble with it, and liked him just well enough to value his praise a little.

It was another week before Mr. Ensdell was back in Elma Place. By that time Mr. Stanton was pronounced out of immediate danger, and Mr. Ensdell considered himself justified in leaving him. His brother had been obliged to return to town some days before; but Mr. Ensdell, who had no acknowledged claims upon his time, felt it incumbent on him to prolong his stay at the Oaks. He was very glad, however, when the physician's fiat was so far favourable that he could withdraw without appearing wanting in kinsmanly feeling. The sick house was a very dreary one. The meals were at all hours; and the servants appeared so hopelessly bewildered as hardly to know their work. Nelly was all day in her father's room, and would have been all night too,

if Dr. Hartree and Mr. Vernon had not peremptorily forbidden it. Mrs. Winthrop was much too miserable to be of the slightest use to herself or anybody else. Her face was swelled more than ever—she declared it was the shock on the nerves which poor Mr. Stanton's illness had given her; and she sat all day long by the fire, with Blair's Sermons open before her, the black silk handkerchief round her head, and a white one, with a deep border, applied alternately to either eye. Mrs. Winthrop was one of those worthy people who take up a great book every winter for serious reading; the one she had selected this winter was "Gibbon's Decline and Fall;" but she had put that aside now, as unsuitable to the melancholy circumstances, and taken to Blair's Sermons instead. It was altogether very uncomfortable for Mr. Ensdell, and he was intensely grateful for his

release when the carriage at last whirled him away from the Oaks towards the railway station. He determined to take Meg to the play the next night. It would do her good, and him too. They should both be the better for a little change after the tedium of their separation. If Meg had felt it half as much as he had, she would be glad enough to see him again.

But Meg bore his arrival as calmly as she had his departure. Mr. Ensdell was almost angry with her. Did the girl care for nothing but her books? He found, however, that she did, when, with the tears welling up into her eyes, she told him of her waylaying the baby, and Mrs. Needham's cruelty.

"She might have let me kiss it," said Meg; "what harm should I do it?—and it is such a pretty little pet—I could have loved it so much if she would only have let me!"

Mr. Ensdell spoke more crossly to Meg

than he had ever yet done. He was annoyed that she should have brought such a rebuff upon herself—she deserved it, he told her—what did she mean by thrusting herself upon people in that manner? What business had she to meddle with the baby?—and what on earth was there in any baby that she should expose herself to any unpleasantness for it? He eased his irate feelings a little by calling Mrs. Needham a fool; but, on the whole, his sympathies were with her. After all, what had she done but what any woman in her position might be expected to do to one in Meg's?

He did not say as much as this to Meg, however, but she felt instinctively that he was far more inclined to blame her than Mrs. Needham. And why should he blame her?—what harm had she done? Was he unjust and cruel too?—or was Mrs. Needham right in snatching her child from her?—and

if so, *what* was it that made her unfit to touch the little creature?

She was troubled and unhappy all the next day; but in the evening, Mr. Ensdell, who had been to Courtmain Street, came home with a box-ticket for the Haymarket; and Meg forgot her uneasy thoughts, and went with him, and lost herself as thoroughly in the fictitious world before her for a time, as if she had never pressed her last kiss upon her own baby, or been grudged the caresses she would have lavished on another's.

But these thoughts and doubts came again and again to trouble her in the dull winter days when Mr. Ensdell was away, and she had nothing but her books and her lace pillow for company. She was beginning to find more in these books than Mr. Ensdell would at all have cared that she should learn. His tastes were too refined, even in his sins, for him to seek to corrupt or de-

grade her mind by allowing her access to any literature that was not at least as pure in its tone as the ordinary run of circulating library volumes. And as his wish had been to elevate Meg, and bring her as near as possible to an intellectual equality with himself, the books he had selected had mostly been of a far higher tone than these. It never occurred to him that their effect might be very different to what he had intended —that if he raised Meg to his own standard in some points, she might rise far above it in others; and that in giving her the apples from the tree of knowledge, he was opening her eyes to distinguish between good and evil.

He had been wilfully blind himself to such distinction. He had eaten his apple, and closed his eyes whenever it suited him to do so; judged the girl, who had lived in her enforced heathendom, as he did him-

self in his practical paganism. He had given her some knowledge of history and grammar—had supplied her with a "Mangnall's Questions," and a dictionary; read selections from the poets and the novelists, and let her read them to him; but there was one Book he had certainly never thought of putting in her way. There were splendid passages in it, he was aware—he had thought, by way of a lesson in elocution, of taking her to hear a certain fashionable preacher read them—but still, after all, what had he to do with this hackneyed volume, and what was the use of giving it to Meg? But with some truisms enunciated in its pages he considered, as a matter of course, she must be acquainted; and if she did as he was doing—disregard them utterly, it was not much to be wondered at. He had been to Swamp Town, but of the life Meg had led there, the moral atmosphere she had breathed

from a child, he could form no conception. Of course, conventionally speaking, both Meg and he were sinners—only there was just this difference between them, that one was sinning with his eyes wide open, the other had been blind from her birth. When hers did open, it was just a question whether they would take the same view of things that Mr. Ensdell found it so pleasant to do.

CHAPTER XIV.

AWAKE AT LAST.

"I caught her, Mary, with the baby in her arms—kissing it as if it was her own! Did you ever hear such impudence! —and that great gaby, Ann, standing by and letting her! That girl has no more brains than an idiot—and as to Robert, he's enough to try a saint! Actually asked me if I was afraid of her giving the child the measles! But there's no fool like a man when a pretty face is in the way!"

"Poor girl!" said Mary; "and she is so young, Jane!"

"You're as great a goose as Robert! Fancy pitying a girl like that—the shameless, good-for-nothing creature! But just bear in mind what I tell you, Mary. It's all very well to say 'poor creature!' but I won't have you putting your pity into practice. You'll look another way if you meet her; and if she *should* be brazen enough to speak—I don't suppose she will, but if she *should*, be sure you don't answer. I declare I shouldn't like it known that she'd even handled baby; but it will be ten times worse, remember, Mary, if she were once seen to speak to you. I wish you'd never painted her portrait—I'd burn it, I know, if I'd my own way. It's a disgrace to the house to have such a thing in it!"

But Mary would not have the portrait burned, though she looked more sadly than ever at the beautiful face that hung in her room, and at the original, whenever she could

catch a furtive glance at her behind the blinds. But some weeks passed before she came in contact with Meg, and had an opportunity of giving her sister a proof of her obedience.

It was now the early spring, and the days were rapidly lengthening. Mr. Ensdell had been from home for a week at the Oaks, and Meg, who had been expecting him to return sooner, had waited day after day indoors, in the anticipation of going out with him. She was weary of the confinement, and therefore, after an early tea, put on her bonnet, and went out for a stroll towards the Park. She had no cut flowers in the house, and as she passed a fruiterer's on her return, she invested a shilling in the purchase of some which attracted her notice in the window. Then she walked on, thinking how she could best arrange them in the vases, and wondering whether Mr. Ensdell would be home

before they faded (he always praised her taste in that way), when, within a few yards of her own home, she met Mary Norton. She had not seen her since her return home a month ago, Mary being very busy with another red-breast, and only going out when it was too dark to paint. The scent of the flowers attracted Mary, who was taking her nephew Harry, a small boy in knickerbockers, to see his grandmamma; and before she had observed who was their bearer, she exclaimed, "Mignonette already, Harry!"

Meg remembered Mary's passion for flowers—how she had heard her declaim in the studio upon the beauty of the roses in Covent Garden, and bemoan her own slender purse, which prevented her purchasing them. Meg had no roses here; but her flowers were very beautiful, and she had a very kindly recollection of the young lady to

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She went home, and flung the flowers on the ground. Let them lie there, since they had only brought this fresh rebuff upon her. What had she done?—what had she done, that all alike should shun and spurn her so? But the answer to this question came more readily than to the one she had asked herself not four months since, when Mrs. Needham had snatched her baby from her. She sat late and long that night solving the mystery for herself. She had not been idle all this long winter, and at last was beginning to realize to some extent the true nature of her position. Mary Norton's rejection of her flowers, but, above all, the sad pity of the look which accompanied the rejection, made things all the clearer. When she had been poor and in rags, that girl had

talked kindly to her—nay, had offered her her own cup to drink from. Now she was richly dressed, with money in her purse, and a home full of all the pleasant and pretty things money alone could buy, she was repulsed—not with such scorn as Mrs. Needham had evinced, but with a pity that was even harder to endure. Was it so?—*was* it so, that she, Meg, was not fit for good, pure women to touch or speak to? Was she so sunk that they would not let their children be caressed by her, nor take a flower from her hand? Like the iron in her soul, crushing, numbing, paralyzing it, came the answer that she was. She had sinned against her womanhood, and these women would none of her. And those other women, of whom she had read, in whose goodness she had gloried, in whose bravery and self-sacrifice she had exulted, whom she felt that she could have loved

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whom she had sat as a model, and therefore she obeyed her first impulse, and offered them with—"Do take them, Miss Norton. I shall be pleased if you will. They're quite fresh, and I can easily get more to-morrow."

The lamps had just been lit, and the two girls and Master Harry stood so near one, that its full light fell on their faces. Mary started back as Meg offered her the flowers, and waved them from her, not angrily or disdainfully, but with a gesture and a look full of pitying sorrow. Meg might be very wicked, and her sister quite right in saying she ought not to have anything to do with her, but still it seemed so hard upon her to have her kindness rejected. Why—why had she so sinned that to accept kindness from her was impossible? She drew Harry's hand in hers, and went on, leaving

Meg looking after her with vague distress and wonder.

She went home, and flung the flowers on the ground. Let them lie there, since they had only brought this fresh rebuff upon her. What had she done?—what had she done, that all alike should shun and spurn her so? But the answer to this question came more readily than to the one she had asked herself not four months since, when Mrs. Needham had snatched her baby from her. She sat late and long that night solving the mystery for herself. She had not been idle all this long winter, and at last was beginning to realize to some extent the true nature of her position. Mary Norton's rejection of her flowers, but, above all, the sad pity of the look which accompanied the rejection, made things all the clearer. When she had been poor and in rags, that girl had

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nocence of which she had read as the crowning grace of girlhood? It was all black—the whole past seemed one dreary slough of mire and filth, which had soiled her for evermore. There was no washing it away—she might repent—she might leave Mr. Ensdell; but would that make her like Mary Norton, or fit to touch the hand of that bright, happy girl who had praised her beauty as Rebecca? The shame and humiliation seemed more than she could bear. Why was she called upon to feel it—why—why—had she been suffered to go wrong, so utterly and irremediably?

She wrung her hands as she paced up and down the little drawing-room. There was no outlet—no hope for the future—let her do what she would, nothing could obliterate the past. Yes, death might—it might obliterate, but not repair—there was no reparation possible for the wrong that, in her ig-

norance, she had done herself. Ah! if death would but come, and still the strong, young life within her,—if she could but lie down and rest, and forget, and be forgotten. Death to Meg was simply a dreamless sleep, —it was the womanhood alone that had woke within her, the outraged, desecrated womanhood, that was now resenting the wrongs and degradation which it had suffered. She was a Pagan still—she had no thought, no repentance for any sin, but the one against herself, the sin which all her life could never either efface or atone.

She had awoke at last, but the waking was imperfect. Perhaps for her, as for many others in this world, it might never be full and true.

She never went to bed that night; but when exhausted by her vigil, sank down by the side of one of the couches, burying her head in its pillows, and moaned herself to

sleep. Her long hair had escaped, and fell down on either side to the ground. An artist would instinctively have thought of a Magdalene as he looked at her; but Meg had never heard of Magdalene, and very little of Him at whose feet she had wept and worshipped. She slept on till, with the morning light, the housemaid came with brush and duster into the room.

Meg stepped past her without a word, and went to her own chamber. She bathed her face in cold water, and sat down mechanically before the toilet-table to brush out her hair. All the while she was thinking—thinking—thinking—what it best behoved her to do. She would *not* stay with Mr. Ensdell—he had been false, and cruel, and wicked—he at least must have known into what he was leading her. But she did not blame him very much—she had gone wrong before she had known him—no doubt he

guessed as much, and therefore, so far he was the less to blame. But she would leave him; the life she was leading was a shame no longer to be endured; but she must have bread to eat if she went on living, and how was that bread to be earned? She could not return to the streets and sell flowers—she shuddered as she thought of all she had passed through in those days; but she had still the same face which Mary Norton had been so pleased to paint, and the same wealth of hair in whose luxuriance Mr. Ensdell had so delighted. Would not artists pay her for sitting to them? Surely she might earn enough to pay for a crust and a roof. She smiled bitterly as she looked around on her luxurious bedroom and her rich dress. She should have to do without such dainty trappings now; but at least, if she could not forget the past, the present should not add to her

self-scorn. Would Mrs. Mayne help her? Or would she spurn her as too vile to be aided, if she knew all? There was no knowing; she was a hard woman, who seemed to think more of art than of anything. Perhaps for the sake of art she might condone Meg's turpitude. She had given her employment before, without questioning her as to her past life—she might do so now. At any rate, she would go to Courtmain Street that very day and try.

CHAPTER XV.

ONCE MORE AT COURTMAIN STREET.

MR. ENSDELL had been very busy for the last few days at the Oaks, having found some employment of a character highly congenial to his tastes for playing at Art. Mr. Stanton was so far better, that he was able to be wheeled from one room to another on the same floor, and to receive a little society. His complete recovery was altogether hopeless, but the medical men were too considerate to tell him so—they only spoke of its certainly being a considerable time before he would be quite himself again, and of the necessity of his not attempting, till a further change took place, to leave the suite of rooms he at present occupied.

Mr. Stanton had no inclination to dispute their fiat. He was too weak to be otherwise than content with the limits assigned him. But as he grew a little better, he amused himself by making the best of his small domain, and having the choicestpictures and articles of vertû brought from the lower rooms to ornament those he now occupied. Like his kinsman, he had an æsthetic turn, and, since his residence at the Oaks, had played at being a connoisseur, as the other had at being an artist. There was a small room at the end of the suite which he had for some time past intended to have painted in panel, as a little boudoir for Nelly. It would make a charming sitting-room for himself now. It was unfortunate that he had not had the decorations completed before this illness. He grieved very much over this; and Mr. Ensdell, who had been very active in re-arranging the pictures from

below, fully sympathised with him. After a time he did more than sympathise—why could not the room be painted even now? The walls were all prepared, and Mr. Ensdell amused himself by sketching on them some of the outlines of the groups of fruit and flowers which were to be the subject. Mr. Stanton sat and looked on at times, and discussed the possibility of the work being yet done to his satisfaction. Fruit and flowers were not Mr. Ensdell's *forte*, for he professed he would have been willing to undertake the task himself. Neither did he know of any one who would quite meet Mr. Stanton's requirements; but it was more than probable his landlady, Mrs. Mayne, did. He would write and ask her; she painted awful monstrosities herself, but she would be sure to know of some rising young artist who would be glad enough to do the work well at a moderate price. Mrs. Mayne pooh-

self in his practical paganism. He had given her some knowledge of history and grammar—had supplied her with a "Mangnall's Questions," and a dictionary; read selections from the poets and the novelists, and let her read them to him; but there was one Book he had certainly never thought of putting in her way. There were splendid passages in it, he was aware—he had thought, by way of a lesson in elocution, of taking her to hear a certain fashionable preacher read them—but still, after all, what had he to do with this hackneyed volume, and what was the use of giving it to Meg? But with some truisms enunciated in its pages he considered, as a matter of course, she must be acquainted; and if she did as he was doing—disregard them utterly, it was not much to be wondered at. He had been to Swamp Town, but of the life Meg had led there, the moral atmosphere she had breathed

them have it. It's selling your soul for money to do so, but they're willing to pay a good price, and as, for some time past, you've been selling your soul for a bad one to the picture dealers, why, you may as well make a better bargain now. You'll live at the house, and I dare say they'll make you comfortable; and you'll have change of air without any expense; and perhaps this may lead to other work of the same kind, which, as you *will* look entirely at the money part of the question, may be a very good thing for you. I disapprove of the whole thing myself. It's prostituting Art to make it turn house-decorator. But, after all, it isn't Art these people want. What would they do with my Boadicea? Do you think that any one would ever presume to decorate a house with her?"

Mary was very sure, in her own heart, they would not; and feeling reassured, by Mrs. Mayne's estimate, contemptuous as it

was, of her powers, asked her to write to Mr. Ensdell and signify her willingness to undertake the commission. A few days after she received a letter from him, enclosed in one to Mrs. Mayne, requesting her to call at his studio the following day, when Miss Stanton would be there to arrange preliminaries with her.

Nelly Stanton had begun to find that work had come upon her—not such work as she would have chosen, or such as she had anticipated; but still it was work; real, earnest employment for both heart and head, and heart and head were all the better for it. Mr. Stanton was a querulous invalid, and a selfish one. Nelly was the delight of his eyes, and he could not bear to miss her from them. He was too great an egotist for his love to be otherwise than selfish, and he kept Nelly in constant attendance, till her cheeks were blanched and her eyes dim-

med. She was his reader, amanuensis, and nurse. It was wonderful, according to Mr. Stanton, how well she filled her *rôle*. He was never weary of singing her praises, and took it as a special compensation from Providence for having incapacitated him by a stroke of paralysis, the giving him such a daughter. Any troublesome thoughts of that other daughter whom he had sent from him in her infancy never distressed him now. The unquiet memories which at the commencement of his illness had so troubled him, had not recurred again. Neither did he give Mr. Ensdell any more lectures as to the necessity of taking care of himself. He was too wrapped up in his own ailments to have much thought for aught beside. His life had been passed within a small circle, and filled with small events, for many years past. The circle had only narrowed, and the events become smaller since his illness.

if so, *what* was it that made her unfit to touch the little creature?

She was troubled and unhappy all the next day; but in the evening, Mr. Ensdell, who had been to Courtmain Street, came home with a box-ticket for the Haymarket; and Meg forgot her uneasy thoughts, and went with him, and lost herself as thoroughly in the fictitious world before her for a time, as if she had never pressed her last kiss upon her own baby, or been grudged the caresses she would have lavished on another's.

But these thoughts and doubts came again and again to trouble her in the dull winter days when Mr. Ensdell was away, and she had nothing but her books and her lace pillow for company. She was beginning to find more in these books than Mr. Ensdell would at all have cared that she should learn. His tastes were too refined, even in his sins, for him to seek to corrupt or de-

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"Poor girl!" said Mary; "and she is so young, Jane!"

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catch a furtive glance at her behind the blinds. But some weeks passed before she came in contact with Meg, and had an opportunity of giving her sister a proof of her obedience.

It was now the early spring, and the days were rapidly lengthening. Mr. Ensdell had been from home for a week at the Oaks, and Meg, who had been expecting him to return sooner, had waited day after day indoors, in the anticipation of going out with him. She was weary of the confinement, and therefore, after an early tea, put on her bonnet, and went out for a stroll towards the Park. She had no cut flowers in the house, and as she passed a fruiterer's on her return, she invested a shilling in the purchase of some which attracted her notice in the window. Then she walked on, thinking how she could best arrange them in the vases, and wondering whether Mr. Ensdell would be home

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whom she had sat as a model, and therefore she obeyed her first impulse, and offered them with—"Do take them, Miss Norton. I shall be pleased if you will. They're quite fresh, and I can easily get more to-morrow."

The lamps had just been lit, and the two girls and Master Harry stood so near one, that its full light fell on their faces. Mary started back as Meg offered her the flowers, and waved them from her, not angrily or disdainfully, but with a gesture and a look full of pitying sorrow. Meg might be very wicked, and her sister quite right in saying she ought not to have anything to do with her, but still it seemed so hard upon her to have her kindness rejected. Why—why had she so sinned that to accept kindness from her was impossible? She drew Harry's hand in hers, and went on, leaving

Meg looking after her with vague distress and wonder.

She went home, and flung the flowers on the ground. Let them lie there, since they had only brought this fresh rebuff upon her. What had she done?—what had she done, that all alike should shun and spurn her so? But the answer to this question came more readily than to the one she had asked herself not four months since, when Mrs. Needham had snatched her baby from her. She sat late and long that night solving the mystery for herself. She had not been idle all this long winter, and at last was beginning to realize to some extent the true nature of her position. Mary Norton's rejection of her flowers, but, above all, the sad pity of the look which accompanied the rejection, made things all the clearer. When she had been poor and in rags, that girl had

talked kindly to her—nay, had offered her her own cup to drink from. Now she was richly dressed, with money in her purse, and a home full of all the pleasant and pretty things money alone could buy, she was repulsed—not with such scorn as Mrs. Needham had evinced, but with a pity that was even harder to endure. Was it so?—*was* it so, that she, Meg, was not fit for good, pure women to touch or speak to? Was she so sunk that they would not let their children be caressed by her, nor take a flower from her hand? Like the iron in her soul, crushing, numbing, paralyzing it, came the answer that she was. She had sinned against her womanhood, and these women would none of her. And those other women, of whom she had read, in whose goodness she had gloried, in whose bravery and self-sacrifice she had exulted, whom she felt that she could have loved

with a love that was almost worship, had she known them—how would they have regarded her? She looked back on the past, and she shuddered as she did so—on the days when coarse words and oaths were familiar to her—on all the evil and the sin which she had been so inured to, so steeped in, as it seemed now, that nothing would ever purify her from the stains she had contracted. It was so—she was a vile, wretched creature, whom good women, however kindly and gentle, could but look upon with loathing. She was polluted, double-dyed in shame, and they shrank from her with horror. She had sinned in ignorance, it was true, but not the less was she lost and fallen. There was no rehabilitation for her—nothing—nothing could make her pure again. Pure! had she ever been so with such a childhood as hers? Could she remember a time when hers had been the in-

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self-scorn. Would Mrs. Mayne help her? Or would she spurn her as too vile to be aided, if she knew all? There was no knowing; she was a hard woman, who seemed to think more of art than of anything. Perhaps for the sake of art she might condone Meg's turpitude. She had given her employment before, without questioning her as to her past life—she might do so now. At any rate, she would go to Courtmain Street that very day and try.

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med. She was his reader, amanuensis, and nurse. It was wonderful, according to Mr. Stanton, how well she filled her *rôle*. He was never weary of singing her praises, and took it as a special compensation from Providence for having incapacitated him by a stroke of paralysis, the giving him such a daughter. Any troublesome thoughts of that other daughter whom he had sent from him in her infancy never distressed him now. The unquiet memories which at the commencement of his illness had so troubled him, had not recurred again. Neither did he give Mr. Ensdell any more lectures as to the necessity of taking care of himself. He was too wrapped up in his own ailments to have much thought for aught beside. His life had been passed within a small circle, and filled with small events, for many years past. The circle had only narrowed, and the events become smaller since his illness.

And, on the whole, as Mr. Stanton had not the slightest idea that his very valuable life would be at all shortened through his illness, and as that illness gave him the privilege of engrossing the attention of every one around him, and keeping Nelly constantly by his side, it was not without its small compensations.

Mr. Stanton took great credit to himself for suggesting that Nelly should drive up to town to meet Mary Norton. It would do her good, and freshen her up a little. She must get away from his sick-room once in awhile. It was hard enough for him to have to suffer. He must not make her life a sacrifice altogether to his own. In reality he wished Nelly to judge for herself whether the young artist would be sufficiently presentable to be admitted to his apartments of an evening, and on what footing it would be best to place her in his house. If she was only an artist, let her be kept in her place,

paid for her work, and dismissed when it was over to the solitude of one of the sitting-rooms downstairs. If she was really well-bred, and tolerably educated in other matters besides her art, she might be allowed the privilege of lightening the tedium of his evening hours a little, or, as he expressed it, "be something of a companion to you, Nelly. Winthrop's a good creature, and, in your position, an inevitable necessity, but she bores me infinitely. She seems to think it necessary to be in a tearful mood directly she comes into my room—and her tears are really more than my nerves can stand. If this Miss Norton is a lady—artists are so, I think, sometimes, now-a-days—it will be a good thing for you, Nelly; and you can make your arrangements accordingly. But it is so much better to know what people are, and on what footing to place them, before we take them into the house."

And so it was that Nelly found herself commissioned to treat with Mary Norton as to the terms she was to receive for painting the octagon room. It was a responsibility she would have shrunk from undertaking or her father from imposing, a few months before; but Nelly's responsibilities had increased of late, since she had had the charge of her father, as well as of her chaperon, and with a wish to prove how punctual she could be in a matter of business, she drove up to Court-main Street a full quarter of an hour before the time appointed to meet Mary Norton there, and was shown by Sarah into Mr. Ensdell's studio.

Mrs. Mayne was ignorant of her arrival, not being at home at the time. She entered the house a few minutes after, letting herself in by the latch-key, which she always carried with her. Mrs. Baring was with her, and the two went at once into the din-

ing-room, where the tray was spread for luncheon.

Mrs. Baring had only just taken off her bonnet, and smoothed her cap by the glass, when Sarah entered, and informed her mistress the young woman she had employed as a model some time ago had called, and wished to see her. Mrs. Mayne and her mother interchanged looks—whatever their suspicions as to Mr. Ensdell's relations towards this young person, it would not be wise to discuss them before Sarah; but Mrs. Baring was perfectly mistress of the situation. "Show her in, Sarah," she said, in as unmoved a tone as if Meg had been duly expected; and then, when the door was closed, she turned to her daughter with, "Tell her you've no further employment for her, Rosa. Whatever you do, get rid of her quietly. I suppose Mr. Ensdell's thrown her off, as might have been expected. Don't

Mr. Stanton had no inclination to dispute their fiat. He was too weak to be otherwise than content with the limits assigned him. But as he grew a little better, he amused himself by making the best of his small domain, and having the choicestpictures and articles of vertû brought from the lower rooms to ornament those he now occupied. Like his kinsman, he had an æsthetic turn, and, since his residence at the Oaks, had played at being a connoisseur, as the other had at being an artist. There was a small room at the end of the suite which he had for some time past intended to have painted in panel, as a little boudoir for Nelly. It would make a charming sitting-room for himself now. It was unfortunate that he had not had the decorations completed before this illness. He grieved very much over this; and Mr. Ensdell, who had been very active in re-arranging the pictures from

below, fully sympathised with him. After a time he did more than sympathise—why could not the room be painted even now? The walls were all prepared, and Mr. Ensdell amused himself by sketching on them some of the outlines of the groups of fruit and flowers which were to be the subject. Mr. Stanton sat and looked on at times, and discussed the possibility of the work being yet done to his satisfaction. Fruit and flowers were not Mr. Ensdell's *forte*, for he professed he would have been willing to undertake the task himself. Neither did he know of any one who would quite meet Mr. Stanton's requirements; but it was more than probable his landlady, Mrs. Mayne, did. He would write and ask her; she painted awful monstrosities herself, but she would be sure to know of some rising young artist who would be glad enough to do the work well at a moderate price. Mrs. Mayne pooh-

poohed his letter when she perused it, and flung it to her mother for perusal.

"Why don't they get a house-painter at once? They might as well ask an artist to turn paper-hanger. But I dare say that little fool Mary Norton will be glad enough to have such a thing to do. It will put a little pocket-money in her way to buy a few fineries with. If there had been no such things as dresses and bonnets in the world, Mary might have been an artist after all."

She wrote to Mary, telling her she wished to see her; and Mary called, and had the substance of Mr. Ensdell's letter communicated to her. She doubted her own capabilities at first, but Mrs. Mayne scoffed at her timidity.

"As far as buttercups and daisies, oranges and apples go, Mary, you'll do well enough. Of course they're not Art, any more than you are an artist, but they are the kind of thing these people want, and you may as well let

them have it. It's selling your soul for money to do so, but they're willing to pay a good price, and as, for some time past, you've been selling your soul for a bad one to the picture dealers, why, you may as well make a better bargain now. You'll live at the house, and I dare say they'll make you comfortable; and you'll have change of air without any expense; and perhaps this may lead to other work of the same kind, which, as you *will* look entirely at the money part of the question, may be a very good thing for you. I disapprove of the whole thing myself. It's prostituting Art to make it turn house-decorator. But, after all, it isn't Art these people want. What would they do with my Boadicea? Do you think that any one would ever presume to decorate a house with her?"

Mary was very sure, in her own heart, they would not; and feeling reassured, by Mrs. Mayne's estimate, contemptuous as it

was, of her powers, asked her to write to Mr. Ensdell and signify her willingness to undertake the commission. A few days after she received a letter from him, enclosed in one to Mrs. Mayne, requesting her to call at his studio the following day, when Miss Stanton would be there to arrange preliminaries with her.

Nelly Stanton had begun to find that work had come upon her—not such work as she would have chosen, or such as she had anticipated; but still it was work; real, earnest employment for both heart and head, and heart and head were all the better for it. Mr. Stanton was a querulous invalid, and a selfish one. Nelly was the delight of his eyes, and he could not bear to miss her from them. He was too great an egotist for his love to be otherwise than selfish, and he kept Nelly in constant attendance, till her cheeks were blanched and her eyes dim-

med. She was his reader, amanuensis, and nurse. It was wonderful, according to Mr. Stanton, how well she filled her *rôle*. He was never weary of singing her praises, and took it as a special compensation from Providence for having incapacitated him by a stroke of paralysis, the giving him such a daughter. Any troublesome thoughts of that other daughter whom he had sent from him in her infancy never distressed him now. The unquiet memories which at the commencement of his illness had so troubled him, had not recurred again. Neither did he give Mr. Ensdell any more lectures as to the necessity of taking care of himself. He was too wrapped up in his own ailments to have much thought for aught beside. His life had been passed within a small circle, and filled with small events, for many years past. The circle had only narrowed, and the events become smaller since his illness.

Jefferies each want a face, and I send one to them. All the consequences that I anticipate will be that the model will earn a few pounds, and their pictures be done all the sooner. As to anything else, I really don't see that it's my affair, or yours either. But, however, I shall see Sniders this evening, and I'll ask him whether red hair is quite indispensable. You can go away now, Blount, and come to-morrow morning. There, good day, lunch is coming, and we won't keep you any longer."

Meg left the room as Sarah entered it with the tray. The rattle of a heavy shower of rain startled Mrs. Mayne. "That girl must stop till this is over, or she'll be fit for nothing if Sniders wants her. I know what it is to have a model with a cold in the head. I shall never forget one day with my Boadicea, when she wanted to use her handkerchief every two minutes."

She went into the hall, where Meg stood with her hand on the door-handle. "Come this way—it won't do for you to get wet." And without a thought as to the appointment made that day between Miss Stanton and Mary Norton at Mr. Ensdell's studio, she opened the door and ushered her into it.

CHAPTER XVI.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS.

MEG went in and sat down mechanically in the studio—she was not aware at first into which room Mrs. Mayne was ushering her. Then she glanced round, and took it all in. The knicknackeries of art and vertû which Mr. Ensdell so delighted in, the carved chairs, the heavy draperies, the lay figure, and the unfinished picture of herself as Rebecca. This last was full of bitter memories—the pride and pleasure with which she had assumed that dress, the delight with which she had looked upon herself when so arrayed, the new thoughts which had occupied her while Mr. Ensdell

was reading Rebecca's story; and now also the consciousness that Rebecca, in her stainless purity, would have shrunk from the lost girl who had dared to assume her semblance. Meg had yet to learn how pitiful good women could be—she had only seen them stern and unforgiving to the sinner against herself. And Meg was hard, too, in her way. Hard even on her own sins, though they were all of ignorance. And her ideals were not judged by a Christian standard. The best of them were but heroic heathens. The Gospel, with its tenderness, its infinite pity and all-inclusive mercy, was a dead letter still to Meg, for all she had learned in the last six months.

So she looked on the picture of Rebecca half fearfully. It was herself and not herself who stood there. An accusing, reproachful spirit looked out at her from her own eyes, and asked her how the impure had dared

to personate the pure—the vile and lost, the stainless? Ah! how she had wept over Rebecca's story; how she had entered into the spirit of her unselfish love and her life of self-sacrifice, and wished that she had been living now, that she might have done her some small service—given her a flower, and so have touched her hand,—brushed the hem of her dress, and so have been allowed to kiss it! And hand and dress would have been withdrawn from her, and the tender, loving eyes have turned ruthlessly away, or have only rested on her face to have flashed forth their cold, unpitying scorn. She was a veritable hero-worshipper, this girl, and in her darkness and ignorance of better things she had erected to herself one idol after another; and now they were all turning from her—telling her they would none of her worship, and that between her and them there was a gulf no devotion

could bridge over, no tears fill up.

And then there was the unutterable bitterness that she had never known what purity and honour were, till they had gone from her for ever; that her garments might have been as pure, her soul as free from soil and smirch as the proudest woman she had read of, had she only known in time. She wrung her hands, and looked appealingly at the picture before her. It was Rebecca after all, though it bore her likeness, and with the tears streaming from her eyes, she murmured, as if to ask for pity,

"I never knew!—in all my life till now I never knew!"

Then she hid her face in her hands, and sobbed aloud.

She had no thought that any one was near to hear her sobs and broken words. She had not perceived Mrs. Winthrop and Eleanor Stanton when she entered the studio,

for the simple reason that they had gone to the little dressing-room which opened from it. Mrs. Winthrop had torn her dress in alighting from the carriage; fortunately she always carried a housewife with her, and Nelly sat to work to repair the damage. Mrs. Winthrop would have been aghast at the idea of "the young person" whom they were to meet, discovering Miss Stanton occupied in mending her trimmings, and had therefore been delighted to take refuge in the aforesaid little apartment. The repairs were completed now, and Mrs. Winthrop was full to overflowing of feeble thanks and apologies. Their utterance was checked, however, by the sounds which emanated from the studio.

Mrs. Winthrop turned in alarm to Nelly,

"The young person's taken ill, my dear —what an extremely unpleasant thing!— whatever had we better do?"

Nelly was about to answer the question by going at once to see what was amiss with the "young person," when she found her intentions anticipated as she heard a soft girlish voice addressing the sufferer with—

"Are you ill? Is there anything the matter? Shall I get you a little water?"

It was Mary Norton. The rain had caused her to be a little past her time, compelling her, on her way, to take shelter in a shop, and she had only just entered the studio. Meg's face was buried in her hands, and Mary did not see whom she was addressing, till she removed them, and looked up. Then Mary started back, as all her sister's cautions flashed across her mind; but the next impulse was one of pity. The girl looked so sorrowful and heart-broken—if this was a sinner, it was no impenitent or hardened one; and therefore, in a tone still more gentle, she repeated—

"I am afraid you are ill. Can I do anything for you?"

Meg looked wistfully at her. *Did* she mean it? She knew what she was, and yet addressed her like that. All good women, then, were not pitiless after all; she wiped her tears away, and gulping down her sobs, said, "I'm not ill, miss, but I've had a great deal to trouble me lately. I'll go away now—I daresay the rain is over; if not, it won't hurt me."

"But it rains nearly as much as ever," said Mary; "and I am sure you are not fit to go out in it. Do sit down and compose yourself a little. You must—indeed you must!"

Mary had quite forgotten all her sister's counsels, for she not only spoke to Meg, but she laid her hand gently on her shoulder to press her back into her chair. Meg looked at her with the tears welling up into her

eyes; then, with a voice that smote Mary Norton to the very heart, said, "Oh! miss, if you had but taken those flowers from me last night!"

Mary flushed scarlet. What was she to say to this girl? She felt sorry for what she had had to do; but, after all, had she any right to regret the having done it? Would it not be best for Meg to hear the truth? It would be very painful for the one that told, as well as the one that heard it—but would it not be best? But while she was hesitating, Meg continued, "I've no right to blame you, miss, I know—I thought it cruel at the time, as I did when your sister snatched the baby from me. But it opened my eyes to what I've been suspecting for some time, and I've made up my mind to leave that house and earn honest bread, if people will only give me the chance. I think Mrs. Mayne will. I'm to

come again to-morrow, and she has half promised to tell me of one or two painters that might like to copy me. It's not what I should choose, but I don't know what else to do—I can't go back to sell flowers in the streets. I know what that life is too well," she shuddered as she spoke, "but I should be glad to get my living in any other way than by sitting still to be stared at; and I'm afraid that if people come to know all, they will turn from me as you did last night—or worse. I don't blame you—no, I don't blame you, or your sister either," she added, passionately; "but if you had only known —if you had only known what a bringing up I had! I was let to run wild from a child, with never a one to tell me what was right or wrong. How was I to know it for myself? I was no worse than the other girls in Swamp Town; but how should I be better? Perhaps all good women have

a right to turn from me; but what chance have I ever had of being one? I shouldn't be what I am if I had only known how to be otherwise! If I had only known!—if I had only known!"

Eleanor Stanton had been listening with her hand upon the door of the little dressing-room. No thought of the breach of the *convenances* involved in her doing so troubled her. Meg's broken words partly disclosed her story, and she guessed the rest for herself. It was a new phase of experience in Eleanor's life—a girl as young, or nearly so, as herself, wailing forth that wild cry of despair at the sin which her ignorance had brought upon her. If she had only known!—and there had been none to tell her! Her eyes had been opened too late to learn anything but her debasement; and all the tears they were pouring forth would never wash it away. Nelly stood now, appalled and

stilled by a passion her quiet, fenced-in path had never brought her near before; a grief such as she could never have conceived. If she could only help the poor unhappy creature now sobbing there, only whisper something of peace and comfort to that broken heart—perhaps bind it up, and bid it beat anew to hope and life. Mrs. Winthrop came up to her. "Let's get away, my dear, I'm afraid that young woman's no better than she should be. I wonder at their showing her in here," she whispered, timidly.

Nelly pushed away the hand which Mrs. Winthrop had laid on hers, almost pettishly. Then she stepped forward and stood by Meg, and said simply, "You're in great trouble. Can I help you?"

Meg remembered the voice—the same which in that very room had told her how beautiful she was as Rebecca—and it was

speaking in softer, tenderer accents now, with a deeper, fuller pity in its tones than even Mary Norton's voice had known. She looked up and saw that face which had struck her as so full of girlish, radiant happiness, bending on her now wistfully and tearfully, as if asking only to be allowed to share and soothe her grief. Mary Norton turned too, and saw Miss Stanton for the first time, and forgot even her own personal interest in the young lady, as the possibility that she might help and befriend the poor creature before them crossed her mind. But no such thought occurred to Meg. This young lady could only pity her in ignorance of how unworthy she was of pity. She would not deceive her. She might be vile and fallen, but she would at least be true. She rose, and retreated a little away from Eleanor Stanton.

"I am in trouble, miss—trouble such as

you can never dream of—and you cannot help me; those about you would not suffer it. Look at the lady there. Don't her very face tell you that I'm not fit for you to touch or speak to?"

Mrs. Winthrop was standing with an expression of mute horror, wondering what Mr. Stanton would think if he only saw the person his heiress was addressing. Mary Norton saw the look, and, with all the emotion Meg had called up, could scarcely repress a smile at the poor lady's alarm. But to Meg that look was full of terrible significance, intimating so plainly as it did the barrier between herself and the young lady. She would go at once—she would not stay where she had no right to be. What had she to do in any place with the good and innocent? But Eleanor Stanton divined her intention—perhaps, with that wonderful prescience which is born of infinite pity, read

her thoughts—for she stepped forward and laid her hand on her.

"I will not let you go till you have told me how I can help you! I have heard enough while I was in that little room to enable me to guess the rest. You have done wrong, and you want to do right. Isn't it so?" she added, turning to Mary Norton. "Perhaps, as you know a little more than I do, you can tell me how to help her. I am Miss Stanton of the Oaks, near Summerly; and I should be so glad if this poor creature would only let me help her!"

Meg shook her head firmly and resolutely. "I have no right to be here—no right to trouble you! If you knew all you'd wonder how I could hold up my head and look you in the face. Miss Norton's sister snatched her baby from me when I was kissing it—last night Miss Norton would not take a

few flowers from me—I don't blame them. Miss Norton has been far better to me than I deserve—but what am I, that you or she should waste a thought upon me? Ask that lady there, who has been longer in the world than both of you, she will tell you that such as I ought not to breathe the same air for a moment with such as you. But if I had only known!—oh! if I had only known, do you think there would have been all this difference between us?"

She moaned the last words forth as if they were wrung from her by unutterable pain. She stood downcast, pale, and tearless-eyed. She had wept so much since the preceding night, that her tears seemed now exhausted, while from the eyes of Eleanor Stanton they were streaming forth, and Mary Norton's were dimmed with them. Eleanor was looking wistfully, eagerly even, as she wept, at the despairing face before her.

Could she do nothing—nothing for this unhappy girl? Would she not let her aid her in the least? She could almost have flung herself at her feet, and implored her to let her do so! Mary Norton looked at the two faces before her, and something she saw in both startled her. She looked again—hers were an artist's eyes, and quick at tracing resemblances. And there was an undoubted likeness between these two faces, though Meg's, even in the gloom of its despair, was of infinitely the higher order of beauty. At the best, Nelly Stanton's face had but the charm of excessive prettiness, of freshness and youth, and radiant colouring, rather than of perfect form or classic outline. A face whose changeful hues and varying expressions would have delighted a poet rather than a painter, and which no sculptor would have selected as the type of his ideal. But Meg's face, to an artist's eye, was almost

perfect—it needed all the glorious splendour of the eyes, the wealth of the dark tresses, the rich, full colouring of cheek and lip, to preserve it from being almost too coldly classical. But still there was a likeness—even the tender, wistful pity of the one face, and the darkling hopelessness of the other, could not obliterate it. Mary looked in puzzled wonderment at one and the other. It was a strange chance that had brought these two together. It was a stranger chance still that had stamped the same impress on each face.

Meg turned again towards the door, and Nelly sprang towards her. "You shall not go like this! Is there not one God for you and me? One Christ who lived and died for us? It may be you are not in need of help, but you sorely need some comfort. Don't you know—haven't you heard—oh! perhaps you, poor, poor unhappy one, they

never told you how a woman who was a sinner sat at His feet, and bathed them with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. And He pitied and forgave her. You cannot have sinned in your short life as she had sinned in hers—and who am I that I should shrink from you when He, the holy and the sinless, did not from her? I think of Him when I speak to you, and in His name I tell you there is peace and pardon for all. If you'll only think it—if you'll only believe it, and for His dear sake ask your Father and His to be forgiven!"

Nelly spoke with streaming eyes and quivering lips. She was carried away by her own earnestness. Could nothing—nothing be done for this poor creature with whom the world must have dealt so hardly? Could she not be brought to feel that God judgeth not as man judgeth, and that to the servant who knew not his Master's will, and

failed to do it, judgment would not be hardly meted out? Given that she had gone wrong —given that she had, in her darkness, wandered far astray—was she, therefore, to consider herself lost for evermore—hopelessly sunk and fallen? In the name of Christ, no! In the name of all that was best, and purest, and tenderest in womanhood, no! There was hope, there was peace, there was pardon yet for her! Why did words fail to tell of it? How should she find a way to reach her soul? Instinctively she flung her arms around Meg, and kissed her lips, and in another second found her hands clasped and covered with tears and kisses. That embrace had done more than the eloquence of a Paul could have wrought. It had not reconciled Meg to herself—nothing could do that—but it had made her feel there was something in common between herself and other women; that her degrada-

tion was not so great and irremediable as she had imagined. And if Eleanor Stanton had wished to conquer Meg's very soul, and bind it to her for ever, she could not have gone to work a surer way than by pressing that kiss upon her lips. It was so little, yet it meant so much. Meg felt that she could have laid her life down for the girl who had folded her in her arms, and whose tears she had felt upon her cheek. Sister to sister could have done no more! Only a kiss!—but all her life she should feel the better and the purer for it! Only a kiss!—but that life would be little enough to give in return!

Another moment, and she was pacing homewards through the streets. If she had been infirm and weak of purpose before, she would be strong enough now. With the memory of that kiss upon her lips, she would brave anything, dare anything,

rather than live another day under Mr. Ensdell's roof. The future might take care of itself. There was always the river as a last resource; but henceforth she would eat honest bread, or starve!

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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